

RADNA

OR

THE GREAT CONSPIRACY OF 1881

BY

PRINCESS OLGA



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CHATTO AND WINDUS, PICCADILLY

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R A D N A.

BOOK I.

CHAPTER I

HIDING THE TREASURE.

'Where am I? Sure, I wander midst enchantment,
And never more shall find the way to rest.'

THE great chieftain of the rocky Valdaïs lifts his brown coronet above a lovely summer scene, looking southward over his dominions.

From his stronghold, King Twer sees a vast plain, broken here and there by what seem to be castles and towers, that rise over waving prairies which extend far as the eye can reach.

He sees silvery streams glittering in the sunlight—winding through plains, encircling villages, watering meadows; and rivulets which trickle through ravines, washing the base of great mossy rocks that have come down in the spring's floods and now lie resting between periodical storms.

Herds of sheep graze peacefully in the valley, guarded

by peasants whose picturesque though tattered garments hang together from sunburnt shoulders.

Where the river is deep, a boat is seen from time to time, crossing with a passing peasant, propelled by a Polish ferryman, sometimes filled with neighbours—men and women going to and from the distant village, or perhaps seeking some secluded spot where, secure from the eye of the vigilant Russian, they may sing their national prayer—the prayer for lost liberty, which from the rising of the sun unto the going down of the same the sons of Poland never forget.

When winter comes, Twer sees a different sight. With the snow for a background, all things above the earth stand out in bold relief: that which seemed to be turret and tower is now known to be giant rocks rising abruptly in groups from the snowy plain, their gray spiky summits piercing the cold blue sky, patches of white clinging to their rugged sides, a dwarf pine here and there holding on for dear life to a scrap of earth secreted in a cleft.

Where the river glitters in summer sunlight only a feathery serpent now winds its way, sending up, where the blast touches it, showers of sparkling crystals, disclosing now and again opal-tinted spots, where, in unsheltered places, the ice has been cleared of its fleecy covering.

Little patches of black and white in the landscape show where human beings have taken refuge: huddled together in groups of twenty, thirty, perhaps fifty cabins, their presence otherwise marked by the smoke, which rises slowly and pauses long in pillowy puffs before it is accepted and absorbed by the still cold air.

No visible road leads to or from these snow-bound hamlets, upon which the eternal rocks look down—immutable spectators of the joys and sorrows of their humble inmates.

With the spring come tidings of good and evil from the outer world, with which these poor people seem connected only by a most galling tie. For with the return of spring comes the tax-gatherer—the only bond between them in their obscurity and the great world's thoroughfare. Whatever the sufferings of the poor snow-bound peasant through the dreary winter, and though an unusually prolonged cold has reduced the small store of winter provisions, the tax-gatherer will come, and, armed with the authority of the Czar of All the Russias, will swoop down and tear from the mouths of children their last morsel of bread, and the last sack of corn, the last sheep from the fold. It is needed to feed and clothe the lazy official—insolent to those whose bread he eats, faithless to the hand that feeds him, a bird of prey, a scourge upon the weak and the helpless.

The protest of those he robs, the cry of the innocent victim, who can hear it in this obscure corner of the world? It is so far away, the voice is so weak. Louder voices nearer home remained unheard or unheeded, till the thundering boom of a bombshell awakened deadly echoes in the palace, and, alas! silenced for ever the friend of the people.

Where Twer looks down from his highest peak, where the river runs swiftly around, washing his rocky feet, separating him from the plains beyond, protected by his

gray battlements from the north, on a table of solid rock projecting midway from his craggy side, the first noble Stetzki built his Castle of Radna.

To it he brought his Hungarian bride, Marta of Usht (or Just), whose father had come to Poland when Louis of Hungary was elected King.

From that time to this, Radna Castle and lands had never been without male heir.

For hundreds of years this stronghold had withstood the storms of the mountain and the ravages of civil and predatory wars.

Revolutions and changes had taken place within its gray walls. Its gates had been opened to admit many a hopeful bride, and had closed upon many a funeral. It had changed grandeur for pinching frugality, and had returned to grandeur and display again. But in all these years, growing into centuries, it had never changed the name of its master. A Stetzki built it, and none but a Stetzki had ever been lord of the gray towers.

During the brilliant reign of Sigismund II., this family had vied with the monarch in the magnificence of his house and the brilliancy of his entertainments.

In the war with Sweden, when every Castle in this half of Poland lowered its flag before the invader, Radna alone held out, till, either ashamed of defeat from a single hand, or in admiration of the unparalleled bravery of the Stetzki, the conqueror gave to Radna her colours and her liberty.

Through the terrible pestilence which devastated the country after the civil wars, the fair women of Radna showed themselves worthy the name for high courage

their ancestors' had won for them. The Castle became a hospital, and hundreds of plague-stricken Poles were borne within its walls to receive tender nursing from gentle hands.

Then came Poland's greatest sorrow. Weakened by constant wars, prostrated by pestilence, constantly called upon to resist invasion, she was powerless to meet and defeat the first act of dismemberment. All raised their voices against this threatened destruction of their national life, and the nobles resisted long, and struggled hopelessly for a time against the overwhelming tide, and then were swept away, either into oblivion or into obedience and submission.

But a few resisted to the last, and the chief of Radna raised his powerful arm and followed Kosciusko to the field.

The struggle was short and cruelly ended, and the Stetzki of Radna was henceforth under the ban.

And now, when Poland had been torn in pieces and divided amongst clamouring neighbours, and, as a nation, existed only in name, the master of Radna was wearing out his life in Siberian exile.

For thirteen years he had supported an existence too horrible to describe to free ears, too terrible to understand from any description in words. Torn away from his young wife and children, made the companion of the vilest and lowest criminals, shut out from intercourse with any who might have sympathized with him, cut off from communication with his home, knowing too well to what indignity his loved ones were subjected in his absence, and believing as he did in the righteousness of the cause for which he suffered—all wondered how he lived on from one sunless year to another.

It was the spirit, the courage of his race which supported him, and the same dauntless soul inspired and strengthened his brave wife. She had seen her household disbanded, her faithful servants one after another removed, every right denied her and her family, her property stolen, and her home despoiled. Yet had she never ceased to hope and to work for her husband's release. Before his fate all other sorrows paled. Night and day his loneliness and his misery stared her in the face. She thought of him and laboured for him to the exclusion of every other consideration, even to the neglect of her children, who, too young to share her dangerous plans, grew up almost strangers to their one parent.

Of these two children, the son was the eldest. Barely twenty-one at the date of this story, he had already incurred the displeasure and awakened the suspicion of those who held the reins of government in his unhappy country, and already sentence of banishment had been passed upon him.

But those who came to see the sentence carried out had gone away with pockets filled with the rapidly decreasing treasure of the poor Countess, and it was well known in the little hamlet that the young Casimir was still at the Castle.

He was too young to do much harm, and, besides, his opinions were much safer than those of his father. For Casimir was an irreconcilable. He might injure himself and his family, but he held none of those dangerous views which involved death or oblivion to those who believed the monarch irresponsible, because ignorant of the persecution of his subjects or powerless to save them. It was in this belief, and the endeavour to test its truth,

that Count Stetzki had sinned, and for which he now suffered.

He had attempted in vain to bring certain grievous wrongs to the notice of the sovereign who is supposed to rule his country, but, of course, he found all avenues barred which lead to the throne. Then, associated with some of the few leading men left to Poland, he committed that crime for which there can be no forgiveness. He published a newspaper, hoping, poor man! thereby to have a medium through which he and others could ventilate their grievances, and trusting by this means to reach his Autocratic Majesty. And if this step brought upon them the animosity of officialism, the paper would probably be suppressed; but the questions it involved would be tried by law, and perhaps in this way the very subjects they desired to publish might reach their object.

How little they must have known in those days of the workings of a despotic Government, the rule of a Bureaucracy! The paper was reported, seized, destroyed, and everyone connected with it exiled. And for this attempt on the part of the Count Stetzki to explain to those who held the Czar answerable for all the miseries they endured, and to expose the true source of their sorrows, he now, thirteen years afterwards, pined in exile, and his young son was under sentence of banishment.

But Casimir did not share his father's belief; in fact, it is doubtful if he knew it. He gloried in his hatred of the conquerors of his country, from whom his countrymen had never received aught of justice or honourable consideration. He encouraged hatred in the breasts of his dependents, and he had thoroughly imbued

his sister, from her earliest childhood, with the same feelings.

She, the daughter, now seventeen, was called by the peasants of the neighbourhood, and by her mother's few remaining servants, Wanda the Beautiful, and most truly she deserved the title. She was, as her mother had been at her age, tall and straight as an arrow, with the same broad, low brow and dazzlingly fair complexion; but here the resemblance ceased, for the Countess Stetzka was blonde, with golden hair and blue eyes, whilst her daughter's hair was darkest auburn, and her eyes large and brown; and the Countess, even in her youthful happiness, had been dignified and grave almost to severity, whilst Wanda had overflowing spirits that nothing had yet come to subdue. Her beautiful face was the index of her happy heart, and childlike mirth spoke from every rosy dimple. It was a face seldom seen at rest; the beautiful lips were fairly wreathed in smiles. Her soft auburn hair seemed inspired with the same spirit of merriment, and defied all restraint. Duly arranged each morning in a great plait down her shoulders, soft and smooth at first, it soon began to shake itself free from bondage and braid; bright rings sprang out and rippled up, making sunny crests on the wavy masses, and forming round her head an aureole of loveliest light.

Where the mountain was steepest and hardest to climb, where the valleys and ravines were green and deep, wherever the river was navigable to her light canoe, in spring, summer, and autumn, there roamed Wanda, free as a mountain bird, and, like it, returning to her craggy home only when night was coming on. And

in the winter, when Nature had spread her white covering over hill and dale, and the river was bound by the frost, the young Countess, in blanket skating-dress, fur-booted and gloved, was the first to be seen on the ice, darting like an arrow over the glassy surface, her golden hair flashing out beneath the white fur cap.

For Casimir had made her his constant companion. He had taught her to climb, to skate, to swim, to row, and to hate the Russians. Her mother had taught her to read and write. This constituted her education. True, the old priest who had been her father's tutor had tried to impart some knowledge of history and geography of the world to the wayward child; but, beyond stories of the sufferings of her beloved country, and some descriptions of places called capitals, where Kings and Princes lived in palaces, little of the good old man's instruction remained with the girl. Yet she sang like a nightingale and played the harp and violin. Her music came from those elves of the Polish forest—the gipsies.

Like them, she played weird songs, without words or note, save the words which were spoken down from the hills in the storm, with cadences which hung in the air. These songs floated up from rippling summer streams, or shrieked out from winter torrents. They were the songs of waters set free from the cold grasp of winter, or singing softly to the summer lilies, or wailing out great crescendoes from rock and cataract, and the murmur of the wind amongst the pines made soft accompaniment to all. These are the sounds out of which the forest gipsies make their music, and the children of the Castle took the gipsies as masters, and played their music as weirdly as they.

The education of the boy had been scarcely more carefully conducted than that of his sister. At an early age, when English boys are yet in the nursery, Casimir had been sent to Lemberg to school; there he had remained till he was twelve, imbibing rebellious ideas against the common foe, and little else except the knowledge of many modern languages for which the people of his country are distinguished. At twelve he returned home, and it had been the hope of his mother that he might gain admission to a good school either in France or England; but his chances of such good fortune grew less and less as each year went by, and his mother's savings diminished before the demands of rapacious officials, so Casimir grew up with little knowledge contained in books, but with a mind far superior to those whose fortune had been sad as his own.

A year before the opening of this story, a few hot-headed youths had determined to form a party of resistance to some most arbitrary laws inflicted upon the neighbourhood.

Casimir was chosen their leader, and meetings were held, at which, no doubt, resolutions of an inflammatory character were passed. These meetings were reported and discovered, and sentence of banishment or imprisonment was passed upon everyone connected with them.

The Countess was horror-struck when one morning this news was officially conveyed to her. She pleaded her son's youth, and the impossibility of danger to the State arising out of the meetings of a few boys. She offered to pay a heavy fine, and declared that if this sentence were carried out, she would herself go to St. Petersburg and bring the matter before the Czar.

The offer of the heavy fine, and the Countess's threat to go to the capital with her complaint, had the desired effect. The Governor shut his eyes to the circumstance that no report of the removal of the young Count had reached him or the headquarters of his department, and so Casimir remained with his mother and sister, and no special instructions were given concerning him to those who held Radna under surveillance.

When an inspecting party arrived, which happened after every rumour of outbreak or rebellion in the province, Casimir kept out of the way, and the Countess bought the party off, and for the time secured her house from the invasion of hungry officials by depriving herself of some jewel or piece of plate, which she could spare better than any portion of her most limited income.

And now, when this story begins, all at the Castle were experiencing anxiety, and there was great excitement in the little hamlet of Radna at the report of a strong body of soldiers having arrived, escorting a number of civil officials.

These had taken up their quarters at a Government station on the other side of the group of rocks directly opposite Radna, where ordinarily only a few subordinates lived, and speculation was rife as to the cause of this fresh invasion.

Countess Stetzka shut her gates and ordered the inmates of her house to be within the walls after nightfall. Casimir became a prisoner to the Castle, and the young Countess was forbidden to wander beyond the enclosed garden.

But as days passed and nothing happened, and the

unwelcome neighbours gave no sign, the people began to wander nearer and nearer to the station; and one who had the temerity to offer something for sale to the little garrison returned with the news that the party were engineers and surveyors, and that their business was to settle certain boundaries. Thus reassured, things at the Castle fell into their normal condition. Wanda, and her little maid Zeka, who had grown up by her side, resumed their rambles; Casimir ventured out in the twilight, and the peasants came in and out as usual.

But the Countess had been more than usually agitated by the report of these visitors, and when one morning the news came to her that the neighbouring houses had been searched, and that Radna would probably share the same fate ere long, she became so greatly agitated that those who saw her thought the brave spirit was at last breaking under the load of anxiety borne so long and so courageously.

Wanda had come in with flushed cheek and sparkling eye.

‘Mother,’ she said, ‘Maria Vilna says the houses on the other side have been taken possession of by the police, and searched, and the priest’s house was turned completely inside out, and that they are coming to Radna.’

The Countess turned deathly pale.

‘Not coming now, Nobleness,’ Zeka said. ‘Wanda, how can you frighten the Countess like this?’

‘Who said I was frightened, silly child? Go, Wanda, and tell Casimir what you have heard. I am naturally anxious for him. I will go and put away the few things we hope to preserve.’

And the Countess turned to leave the room.

'Mother,' Wanda cried, 'let us hide the things where *you* know.' She looked about, and seeing that they were alone—'Let us hide them at the Long Moss Spring. Don't you remember where we hid Casimir's pistol and all my money—nearly three roubles—two years ago, and they never looked there? Do, mother dear. It will be such fun, hiding and watching them.'

'Acting as pointers,' the Countess said, releasing her daughter's hands from her neck, where Wanda had impetuously thrown them. 'No, my darling, I——' but she said aside, as she turned away: 'It might be useful in drawing attention from the house.' Well, Wanda, if you think you and Zeka can keep the secret to yourselves, and be very, very careful, I think it might be wise, and you may take the things to your hiding-place.'

Wanda clapped her hands in childish delight, and the next afternoon, just before the sun had dropped behind the hills which bordered the horizon, she and her companion, Zeka, started upon their mission.

Though late autumn, the trees had only just begun to change their colouring. The great rocks, which were to be met at every step in the grounds of the Château, were carpeted with a darker moss than that which covered them earlier in the year, and the tallest nut-trees, from their uppermost branches, had only begun to drop their fruit. The ground, well wooded with oak, maple, and other hard woods, bought and planted by former Stetzakis, and thick with rich undergrowth, sloped rapidly down for some two hundred feet from the Castle to the river, which wound around the mountain, bounding it on two sides. This sloping woodland was shut in on the left and north by a precipitous wall of

solid rock, which joined the Castle and then dropped down with the mountain till it ended in a high bluff of gray stone, whose foot the clear water of the river washed. Following this wall, if one could have done so, it would be found to divide the mountain in half, and on the side opposite Radna it was higher and, if possible, more precipitous. But on that side there was no river at its base to stay footsteps which had ventured thus far. This high wall-like ridge separated Radna from the old Château on the other side, now used as a Government station, by an impassable barrier, and the road around the rocky hills from one Castle to another was nearly ten miles long. So the Countess had little fear of a surprise from the soldiers quartered at Britzka, and upon this bright September evening she dismissed her daughter and Zeka without fear on their errand to the Long Moss Spring.

It was not the first time these children had performed the same little errand upon which they were bent, and they stepped off into the wood and began to descend the hill as fearlessly as the goat which they startled on their way.

At first they walked slowly as the steep descent would permit, but as they drew nearer their destination the ground fell more rapidly, and the girls, with a basket swinging between them, were soon running at a speed they could not check. Bounding from one mossy rock to another, which lay in their broad, soft path, with flushed cheek and sparkling eyes, they came upon the three giant stones which guarded the spring, turned suddenly with the path, and almost fell into the arms of a man who had risen from an artist's folding-seat and had stepped forward to see who was coming.

Zeka shrieked, and, turning as suddenly as she had appeared, started to retrace her steps. Wanda recovered herself instantly, her cheeks aflame with surprise and shame at the undignified manner of her approach; but her native dignity came to her aid, and, stepping back, she curtsied to the stranger, and begged his pardon.

The man, who stood as if spell-bound gazing at this beautiful apparition, recalled to consciousness and the situation by her voice, quickly removed the small cloth cap he wore, and bowed profoundly.

‘It is for me to beg pardon, mademoiselle. I fear I am trespassing. I was not aware there were inhabitants on this side the mountain.’

He stood with cap in hand, tall, dark and handsome, and gazed with increasing wonder at the lovely girl standing with downcast eyes before him.

As he ceased speaking, Wanda looked up.

‘These are the grounds,’ she said, ‘belonging to our house, and we are not accustomed to see strangers at Radna.’

She spoke in Polish, and looked up, but only to cast her eyes quickly down again in shame and confusion at the inhospitality of her words.

‘Radna—the Castle of Radna! Again I must beg your forgiveness for this intrusion; I was not aware I was trespassing. I have been here before; I will not intrude again.’

Whilst this little dialogue was going on, Zeka had crept back to her mistress’s side, and now stood staring at this stranger who had so nearly frightened the wits out of her. She turned from one to the other as they

spoke, and now, when he had said the last words, she looked for Wanda's answer. His voice was soft, high-bred, and sympathetic, and conveyed more than his words the mortification he felt at his inhospitable reception.

Wanda, poor child! what could she do? She had said the first words which came to her startled mind. She had meant nothing, and now she found herself guilty of what in Poland is most despised—inhospitality. This handsome man, with the soft voice and courteous manner, was a revelation the most delightful of all her life's experience, and she had insulted him. As he ceased speaking, she tried to look up; but there were tears in her eyes, which made it more prudent for them to remain fixed on the ground.

'I did not mean to be rude,' she said; and as she spoke she held out her hand. 'My mother would welcome you to Radna. Please forgive me; I was so frightened, I did not know what I was saying.'

He stepped forward and, with quiet courtesy, raised her fingers to his lips. Then he turned to the easel, upon which was a half-finished sketch of the three rocks and their immediate surroundings.

'This is what brought me here,' he said. 'A few days ago I came upon this lovely spot, and sketched it; to-day I came to do a little more work. Will you give me your opinion?'

Wanda and Zeka both gazed at the sketch with wonder. There, between the three mossy rocks, the water lay like the reality—cool and clear—reflecting tall grasses, drooping ferns, and the guardian stones. There was the glimpse of sloping woodland and blue sky

through the near trees, and then a bit of the very path down which they had just come.

Silently the two girls gazed for a few seconds, lifting their eyes from the picture to the scene, and then looking back to the picture, mute with astonishment.

‘Wonderful and beautiful,’ Wanda at length said, and raising her eyes to the stranger’s face, she found herself, and not the picture, the object of his gaze.

‘Wonderful and beautiful indeed,’ he said, still looking at her.

He spoke the words in Russian, and if he had uttered a curse, he could scarcely have created greater consternation: Both girls started. Wanda, in a kind of suppressed fear, clutched Zeka’s hand, and with eyes dilated and lips apart, as if some terrible spectre had risen before her, turned to go.

The stranger, at a loss to account for this sudden and extraordinary interruption to an interview becoming dangerously interesting, turned his head to see if any other object in view would account for the look of terror he saw in the girl’s face, and then he advanced a step toward the retreating figures.

‘May I hope, mademoiselle, to be allowed to finish the sketch? May I return to this lovely spot to-morrow?’

There was more of sadness than anger in the girl’s voice as she replied, turning and standing erect and dignified:

‘We have no power to prevent the presence of your countrymen. Radna is under your surveillance. Come, Zeka; we must instantly return.’

For a single instant a shade of anger passed over the

stranger's face. Then he raised his eyebrows, smiled, and stepped forward.

'Mademoiselle,' he said in French, 'why do you call me Russian? Because I spoke a few words of that language? I am no more your enemy than you are mine. I speak many languages. Pardon me for not sooner introducing myself. I am——' He hesitated an instant, whilst Wanda turned with undisguised pleasure. 'I am Starzi, a Hungarian artist.'

Wanda gave him her hand, joy beaming in her face.

'I am so glad,' she said; 'forgive me. I am sure monsieur is welcome to come here whenever he likes. My mother, the Countess Stetzka, will be delighted to see him at the Castle. Au revoir, monsieur.'

He bowed silently. Then stood and watched them till they were out of sight. Then he turned with a sigh to his easel. As he did so, he saw lying on the ground the basket the two girls had dropped in the first moment of their fright. He stooped to pick it up, and to his surprise saw, lying half-hidden in the moss, a small jewelled cross. He opened the little pannier to replace the jewel, when what was his astonishment to find the contents of a more or less valuable description! He smiled, as he said to himself:

'The fairies, I see: coming in the guise of a beautiful princess, dropping jewels at my feet. Well, this will furnish an excuse for a visit to the Château.'

He put it down beside his easel, and was on the point of removing his canvas, when a noise like fluttering wings arrested his attention, and in another moment Zeka was standing panting before him, her cap hanging down her back, the pins all out of her hair, the picture

of fright and anxiety. She rushed at and picked up the basket.

‘Oh!’ she said breathlessly, clutching it in her arms. ‘The good God be thanked! If we had lost it! Ah! if we had lost it!’

She was going to depart without a word of explanation, but the stranger detained her.

‘Tell me,’ he said, speaking very good Polish, ‘why you and your fair mistress were carrying about in the wood such valuable things. What were you going to do with them?’

Hugging the basket still closer, and turning to depart, she said :

‘I cannot stay, sir, to answer questions; my mistress will be anxious till I return.’ Then, as a thought of the safety of the jewels crossed her mind, her suspicions were awakened by the stranger’s questions. ‘How did you know,’ she said, ‘the basket contained valuables?’

And, as if to reassure herself of the safety of the treasure, she sat down upon the artist’s stool and opened the basket and counted out the contents into her lap : ‘The cross of Count Stanislaus, which was given him by Wladimir; the pearls of the Countess Marie, given Wanda as a parting gift; Prince Itzvan’s ring, with which my mistress was engaged to my master; the two packages, and the cup. Yes; they are all here. Ah! I am so relieved! Now I must go.’

She crammed the things into the basket, and started up the path; but, as she passed the stranger, he put out his hand and stopped her.

‘Now that you have proved my honesty, you can trust me. What were you going to do with these things?’

‘Well, I don’t see that it can do any harm to tell you, especially as we are taking them back to the house. But no; I must go. I tell you my mistress is waiting with anxiety till I return.’

Again she essayed to go, and again he detained her.

‘Tell me first what you were going to do with the things.’

‘If I tell you,’ she said, ‘will you promise to let me go without another question?’

‘I promise.’

‘Then,’ said the girl, stretching her head forward and speaking in a kind of loud whisper, ‘we were going to hide them.’

‘To hide them?’

‘Yes. Now good-bye; and, as you have been good and kept your word, I will tell you we were going to bury these things, to hide them from the Russian soldiers—Russian thieves I call them—who are coming to search the Château one of these days.’

Then she turned and flew up the path, her stiff cotton gown rattling as she ran.

As the young man stepped out into the path to watch the retreating figure, he saw her mistress dimly outlined against a tall gray rock. He lifted his cap and stood bareheaded till, joined by Zeka, both girls went up the path and were lost to sight. Then he turned back and stood for a moment beside his easel. His face was grave and stern; his thoughts gave to his features a severity of expression which had not been there before.

He paused a few moments before his picture, but it was evident that neither the sketch nor the subject of it now occupied his mind. After a few moments he turned

away, crossed the little enclosure, stopped at a point where the path, interrupted by the spring, began again, and led down the hillside. Here he paused, and taking from his pocket a whistle, he blew a few bird-like notes.

The signal was answered by two men, who seemed to spring out of the earth.

The stranger spoke no word to them, but pointed towards his sketch, and went on into the wood.

The men silently folded up the easel, put the sketch carefully away, arranged everything in a portfolio, and, taking this and the folding-chair between them, followed him who was evidently their master.

A few moments later the sound of a horse's hoofs, muffled by the soft moss which covered the woodland path, was heard, and then all was still.

CHAPTER II.

‘ I SAW IT WAS A GHOST.’

‘ Now came still evening on, and twilight gray
Had in her sober livery all things clad ;
Silence accompanied : for beast and bird,
They to their grassy couch, these to their nests.

 Hesperus, that led
The starry host, rode brightest, till the moon,
Rising in clouded majesty at length,
Apparent queen, unveil’d her peerless light,
And o’er the dark her silver mantle threw.’

MILTON.

It is sunset; the western sky has spread out a glorious canopy of red, reaching far up from the horizon, the colours fading as they go higher, and at last paling to opal-green, and tinting the harvest moon.

Radna stands out in grand relief against the rocks now glittering in the setting sun, whilst all below, tall trees and wooded undulations, is in wavy shadow.

Far out on the plain a red spark here and there twinkles from the tiny window of a peasant’s cabin, or marks the spot of a gipsies’ encampment.

Not a breath disturbs the leaves or ruffles the breast of

the silvery river, which flows noiselessly around the foot of the great rock, its current bending down tall reeds, which lift their heads again and nod good-bye to the last autumn flower dying on the river's bank.

Not a sound comes from the Castle, and silence reigns at the Long Moss Spring.

Looking up the pathway from the rocks the shadows grow deeper and darker, till nothing but an arched entrance made by the touching boughs can be seen, with patches of white moonlight on the leafy floor beyond.

Now, in this obscure archway something takes shape, so indistinct at first that it seems only a lighter shadow or a pale reflection. Then it moves onward, and now takes the form of a cloaked figure, which, coming into the more open path, quickens its step, and finally springs from rock to rock with the lightness of a chamois.

Now in the full moonlight the figure pauses—a woman, clad from head to foot in a gray mantle. She stands and listens.

'Twilight,' she says. 'This is long after twilight in these dark places; but at the Castle it was scarcely sunset.'

She peers into the dark wood beyond; all is still.

'I fear I am too late. If he has been, and could not stay.' She starts and looks furtively around. 'How I wish he would name a definite time! When it is twilight on one side the mountain, it is quite light on the other. I surely did not mistake!'

She draws from beneath her cloak a note, stands holding it up to catch the moon's rays, now struggling with departing day, and falling fitfully in shafts and flecks of light between the trees. As she turns her head from side

to side to make out the writing, the hood of her cloak falls off, and discloses the lovely face of Wanda.

‘Be at the Long Moss Spring this evening at twilight,’ she reads, or repeats, for she surely could not see the lines. ‘Let nothing prevent you; it may be our last meeting for many a day.’

‘Oh, this is terrible!’ she says. ‘There must be another message.’

She retraces her steps for a few paces, leaves the path, and, standing on tiptoe, examines the hollow of a tree. Finding nothing, she returns to the rocks and into the moonlight, and bends again her ear to the ground and listens.

Now a bright smile lights up her lovely features, as a quick footstep comes nearer and nearer. She bounds forward—a joyful exclamation:

‘Loris!’

‘Wanda!’

They return to the shelter of the guardian rock, her arm in his, her face upturned, his manly head bowed down over her.

‘And you were here before me, love? The first time my darling had ever to wait for me; and I lingered purposely, because waiting here one moment for you seems an eternity. I get full of apprehensions, and torture myself by thinking there must have been some misunderstanding, and that you are not coming—that you cannot get away unseen. How did you manage it, my own dear love, this evening?’

‘Without difficulty,’ the girl replied. ‘Mamma has, I fear, received some bad news, or has some fresh trouble. Yesterday she told me she had work to do which would

probably make her hours late, and that she might not disturb me she has moved her apartment, and has gone away into the North Tower. I am dreadfully anxious about her. She seems so disturbed, and immediately after dinner, at four o'clock, she went away to that gloomy place, never before occupied by anyone since I can remember.'

A curious look, amused and knowing, passed over the young man's face, as the girl artlessly told her little story.

'It is all the better, my own, for you and me that Countess Stetzka has this work to do just now. But did no one see you leave the Castle?'

'No one but Zeka.'

'And she can be trusted?'

'Implicitly, Loris; but why do you fear discovery? What have we to fear? Not my dear mother, who once loved as we love, and who is all indulgence, all tenderness, who never in her life has denied Casimir or me anything, or any pleasure she could give us. Oh, my dear love, if you would but come up to the Château and tell her all! If you only knew my sweet mother, and how little you have to fear!'

Without answering her, he spread his cloak on the rock.

'Sit here, my Wanda,' he said; 'I have much to say to you, and my little hour will have fled before I have told you of our coming separation.'

'Separation! Oh, Loris, how easily you say that word which goes to my heart like a dagger! Surely, surely, you do not mean to leave me with this secret burning in my heart! Oh, do not go away for a day

till you have seen my mother! I cannot endure your absence, and keep the secret, which is all I can support now, with you here to strengthen me; and what shall I do when you are away? I think, my love, that I shall die.'

She put her hands to her eyes and sobbed, whilst tears trickled through her fingers.

He took her hands away, and kissed her tear-stained cheek and eyes until she smiled again.

'Wanda, my beautiful, my own, do you not trust me, believe me?' He knelt before her, and looked up pleadingly into the beautiful face, so childlike in its expression of misery. 'Cannot you understand, my love,' he said, 'that there may be circumstances in life where silence is not only discreet, but a duty, a sacred duty? I may not see your people now; I must go away from you for a time. God knows it will seem an age. But, my darling, I have work to do: work that you and yours will bless me for when it is done, and I will return to you so surely as life is spared me. 'Till I return, my own, think of me, love me, believe me.'

'I cannot think of this separation without agony,' the sweet voice says. 'What will the reality be? I cannot, cannot bear it. I do not seem to have lived before you came. I cannot remember what existence was like. I seem to have had nothing to think of; now my life is so full, my world so beautiful. Oh, Loris! do not leave me! If you must go, take me with you. I could endure anything but separation.'

'Wanda'—and now his voice is low and his accents serious. 'There are grave reasons for my departure and for secrecy. Cannot you see and understand, my darling,

that under certain circumstances secrecy means safety, and indiscretion means danger? Your own brother——'

She started up and looked quickly around, putting out her hand as if to shield him.

'Danger!' she whispered; 'danger! Safety! no, no. I did not think of that, and you never told me. You are keeping something from me now. Oh, my love, come home with me! You will find only friends, and Radna a refuge for the oppressed. We have hidden fugitives for weeks. Is it exile, banishment, escape? Oh, Loris! I never in my selfishness thought of you otherwise than free as a mountain deer, and now the hounds are pursuing you. What do you hide from, my love, my love?'

The girl stood now with her hands on his shoulders, looking up into his face, her voice full of sweet tenderness.

'Sweetheart,' he said, taking both her hands in his strong grasp, 'my fear is not of this kind. I am not in hiding. I almost wish I were, that you might be my guardian. Here, sit down, my love, for I have much to say, and I would not keep you long to-night, though God knows how I look forward through the dreary monotonous day to this hour, and now how fast the moments fly when we are together! Listen, now, my dearest Wanda. I must go away to-morrow, but no day shall pass without bringing you news of me. You shall have a letter every day—I wish I could say every hour.'

'How can I get letters and keep our secret? I never had a letter in my life. My mother seldom gets letters, and then everyone in the house knows of it, and what

they are about. I could not refuse to tell my mother from whom letters came to me, and——'

'Nevertheless, you shall hear every day, my darling, and by the same means that brought you this ;' and he touched the little note she had put in her belt. 'Every day, in love's own letter-box, and at twilight, I will think of you coming here for my message. In spirit, my Wanda, I shall be with you in this, to me, dearest spot on earth. Only be discreet, my own love, and think of me, and wear this for my sake.'

He took from his belt a locket and a chain. The locket, a flash of jewels ; the chain, a thread of gold. Wanda took the precious toy in her hand, and tried by the light of the moon now falling full upon her to see the picture it contained ; but the face was indistinct, and only the brilliants flashed and sparkled in the moon's light.

Her girlish fancy was touched by the beauty of the jewelled case. She held it up and down to catch the moon's rays, and then she caught it to her breast, and in a little transport declared she would keep it for ever and for ever.

He clasped it around her neck, and then again seating her, and himself beside her, he resumed the unwelcome subject of the coming separation.

His soft tones, his tenderness, the perfect respect and consideration of his manner toward this unprotected girl, treating her as if she were a royal princess, he an humble subject — his manly beauty, and the romantic circumstances of their meeting and surroundings, all served to awaken the girl's poetic nature, and to arouse the strong passionate love of her race.

All his arguments and pleadings could not win her consent or reconcile her to this threatened separation. She clung to him, begged, prayed, pleaded; and when she found all in vain, she burst into passionate weeping.

Then the bell at the Castle struck nine, and startled them both.

He rose up and stood before her.

'My darling,' he said, 'you must be strong for my sake. If you love me, you will help me to make this parting possible. I have difficulties before me, and grave ones. I need your support and your love to strengthen me in the work I must do. Now, my own, I see you will not desert me when I most need you, or try to persuade me to neglect what I tell you is a sacred duty.'

He had struck the right chord. The young face changed instantly from tearful, almost childish sorrow, to strong resolution. She stood up beside him and gave him her hand.

'You are right, Loris. I will be strong for your sake; strong, like my mother, and, like her, patient and true. Go, my own love. I will trust you, I will obey you; day and night I will pray for you; your slightest wish will be a sacred duty. Forgive my childishness. Tell me all you can of yourself to save me anxiety; but if you tell me nothing, I will believe the best.'

'My own love!' he said; 'now I can go and fight my battle with a strong arm. One thing you must know, dearest, before I go. My trusting angel, you do not even know who I am.'

She had moved her head away to hide the tears that would force themselves through the long lashes; but, as the last words reached her, she turned back quickly.

‘Do not know who you are! What do you mean? You have told me who you are. You——’

‘Yes, my love, and I have told nothing but the truth; but only half the truth. Listen, my own; listen, and do not blame me.’

‘Blame you, Loris! Do not keep me in suspense; I am cold with sorrow, and a terrible fear. I do not understand. Tell me, my love, quickly, what you mean—are you not Loris Starzi?’

‘Yes, dearest, that is my name—one of them, and I am Hungarian through my mother and by birth. I hope I only exaggerated in calling myself an artist. But, Wanda, I should have told you this long ago—that Loris Starzi is only half my name. And now I fear to tell you the rest.’

‘Fear to tell me who you are?’

‘Yes, my Wanda; I fear your passionate nature and the prejudices of your education. I fear that for one moment you may cease to trust, to love me.’

‘Fear! prejudice!’ she said, her great eyes open to their fullest, gazing in amazement in his face. She put her hand to her forehead and pushed back the soft wavy hair which had fallen over her fair brow, as if trying to relieve her memory. Then she said, speaking slowly: ‘What is this you mean? You said I was to help you. See, I am strong and calm. Tell me to do anything to test my strength; but this suspense I cannot bear. I——’

He stepped a pace away from her.

‘Wanda,’ he said, ‘could you hear anything about me that would change your love? Suppose I were of low birth?’

'Ah!' she said, coming close to him, her hands clasped and her sweet face lit up with joyful relief. 'How can you ask me such a thing? Were you the son of a peasant, it could make no difference to me now, save that in future all peasants would be dear to me for your sake.'

He caught her in his arms.

'My love! my love!' he said. 'I am no peasant. I give you a prince's hand, a princely fortune. My name, one of the noblest. I am——Starzi Loris Prince C——.'

For an instant Wanda stood as if transfixed. Then, with the cry of a poor wounded thing, she sprang away from her lover, her eyes fairly starting from their sockets, every vestige of colour fled from her face. With her hands clasped before her, as if pleading for mercy, she stood before him, then reeled and fell.

He caught her, carried her down to the spring at their feet, and laying her on the mossy bank, bathed her face and chafed her hands. But she lay still as death, and a terrible fear seized upon the young man. He snatched the silver whistle that hung at his belt, and blew a few notes; but as he did so, Wanda moved, and he put up his hand and motioned back two men who had appeared in immediate answer.

She opened her eyes, and found those of her lover gazing with fear in her face.

For the moment she had forgotten all. She sat up, pushed back the hair from her forehead, and gazed around.

'Where am I?' she said. 'You are here, Loris? Why do I suffer, then? Oh!' she said, looking up, 'I know—I remember! No, don't!' she hoarsely whispered, starting back, shrinking from his outstretched hand. 'No, no—'

never again! Never! never! Can that be so, and can I live on? Ah, yes! I see it all now, and there is no more happiness ever possible for me in this world!

She covered her face with her hands, crouched down upon the earth, and sobbed for the love that could be no more.

He stood before her, his arms folded upon his breast, still as a statue, grief, disappointment, vexation struggling with his love for this girl who spurned him. At last he spoke:

‘I am grieved to the soul to see your sorrow. I thought and believed the declaration I had to make of my name and position would have been received by you far otherwise. I regret bitterly that from the first I did not tell you all. But how was I to know that I should ever see you again? And when, after that first interview, I again sought and met you, I believed I did so as an artist, that I might paint the loveliest face I ever beheld. Then, Wanda, you know what followed. As day after day we met here, we found ourselves drawn together by a force we could not have resisted had we tried. I found myself happy only when near you. Your image interrupted every occupation. Then I declared my love, and was supremely happy to find it returned. I determined at all risks to win your hand as I had your heart, and it was to obtain the consent of those to whom I am bound that I was leaving you to-morrow. Now I have told you all. Will you bid me stay or go?’

Wanda slowly rose up. They both now stood in the full light of the great autumn moon. Her hood hung back, releasing her wavy hair, which fell unbound down her shoulders. The long gray mantle, fastened at the

throat, was parted and thrown back by her arms, which she raised up with clasped hands. Her lovely face was colourless in the moonlight.

'God forgive you for what you have done!' she said, and then she turned away.

Her look of despair and the intensity of her words awed him. He had removed his cap that the night air might cool his head. As he stood thus, she moved slowly away, as if it were a pain to walk, and began the slight ascent from the Spring.

'Wanda!'

It was a cry of agony that arrested her, and when she turned he was kneeling at her feet.

'Wanda!—my love, my life! I cannot lose you! I would lose all else first. Country, friends, family—all for your sake! You cannot mean that you will allow a prejudice of race to separate us now. You cannot—you shall not!'

He seized her hands and kissed them passionately. His upturned face showed the intensity of his feelings, but the touch of his hand seemed to rouse the bitterness she had been taught from her infancy for his race.

With a cry almost of loathing she sprang back.

'How dare you!' she said, her lips trembling with rage. 'How dare you touch me—me, Michael Stetzki's daughter? Prejudice, you say! Is it prejudice that makes us fear and hate the wild beast that would devour us! Is it prejudice which makes my mother hate those who have bound her husband in chains and conveyed him to a living grave, who have murdered her friends and robbed her children, who have wrung from us every pleasure, every privilege of freedom,

and who torture our poor peasants at their pleasure? It was like one of your race to steal into the confidence of a poor unsuspecting Pole. It is your trade, the profession you glory in, which men of all other countries despise, and to which they give the infamous name of spy.'

The girl's voice quivered with the intensity of her passion; her eyes flashed out defiance. She seemed to rise above him where he stood, one hand raised as if in protest.

As the word 'spy' left her lips, he started as if stung, and his hand involuntarily flew to his sword. He stepped forward, but she raised her hand against him, and went on:

'Yes, spy. What else brought you here with a false name, a false heart? You lured me to betray them—my dear ones. But you shall have little glory or triumph in your work. You have taught one more Pole how to suffer, how to hate.'

With the last word she turned to the path, and with a firm step began the ascent.

For a moment he stood looking bitterly after her. Then, under some suddenly formed resolution, he sprang up the path, and in an instant was beside her.

Whatever he intended doing or saying was cut short, and both he and Wanda stood transfixed to the spot by a piercing shriek, which rang out in the still air and chilled these two turbulent hearts to rigidity.

For a second they both paused, and then Wanda fled up the pathway to the Castle. He stood looking after her for a moment, and then followed at a little distance till she entered the gateway, the faithful guardian of which he knew to be Zeka.

He still lingered some moments, then slowly and sadly descended the hill, joined his attendants at the other side of the enclosure, and rode away.

Breathless and almost overcome with fear, Wanda gained the court. The gate was unbarred, as were also the doors leading to the long stone corridor, lit by a single lamp, which seemed to make it more gloomy as the wick flickered, throwing shadows on the bare walls from great chains which supported it.

Through this corridor Wanda fled with all the speed left to her feeble limbs, terror in her white face, till she reached midway a curtained door that led to her own room. The door yielded to her hand, and she tottered and would have fallen, but was caught in the arms of Zeka, whom, shivering with cold or fear, she found weeping.

Wanda, now utterly exhausted, sank upon the nearest chair, scarcely able to ask the question :

‘What is it? What has happened?’

‘Oh, Wanda, my beloved mistress, thank God for your safety! How can I tell you—how *can* I tell you what I have seen? But, my best love, you are ill—you are faint. Here, take this. Oh, Wanda, did you see anything?’

She held water to her mistress's lips, led her to the couch, unclasped her belt, and, like a child, Wanda was laid upon her pillow.

After a few minutes she had so far recovered herself as to be able to speak, but in such feeble tones that the little maid leaned over her mistress, and tears of anxiety and fear came into her eyes.

'Zeka,' Wanda said, 'get me ready for bed. I am weary—oh, so tired! Whatever you have to tell me cannot be worse. Oh, nothing can be worse than what I already know! Tell me who shrieked. What has happened?'

The maid, with trembling fingers, began unclapsing her mistress's dress, crying the while, wiping the tears from her eyes from time to time, glancing around as she went on, as if she feared some spectre would spring from the dimly-lighted corners.

'Oh, my mistress,' she said at length, 'do forgive me for frightening you; it was I who shrieked. I could not help it; I saw a ghost—two ghosts! Yes; do not doubt me, Wanda—I swear to you I saw them!'

'What is this disobedience, Zeka? You know how my mother dislikes these stupid ghost-stories, and forbids them. I cannot believe you could be so foolish as to let some imaginary thing frighten you, when so much depended upon silence and secrecy—silence and secrecy! I am done with you for ever; yes, for ever!'

The beautiful head dropped upon the pillow, and Wanda, covering her eyes, cried silently.

Zeka, also crying, began again:

'My mistress, I tell you of no imaginary thing. I saw the ghosts; and oh, St. Stanislaus! I saw the wraith of the Countess your mother. Do listen to me, Wanda; I shall die of fright and misery if you do not believe me. Now I will tell you all. There, lie on the pillows. There, dear mistress. Now listen:

'At nine o'clock I went down to meet you, as you told me. When I reached the door, and before venturing in the court, I stood a few moments to be sure no one was

stirring. Well, whilst I listened, suddenly I heard the Countess speaking just at my very side. I started, and could not prevent making a little noise; then all was still. I dared not move after your mother spoke, and then she said:

“It is only the wind, or a rat in the wood. No; there is nothing to fear here. I sent them to bed and forbade them leaving their apartments till morning. We are safe; but oh, the misery of this constant dread!”

“It will soon be over now, thank God,” a man’s voice said; “let us walk.”

‘Yes,’ Wanda said, sitting up on the couch, and now fully interested.

‘Well, then they walked off to the other side of the court, and I began to wonder how I could get round to the gate to give you warning; for that was then my only fear, of your coming to the gate and tapping, and the Countess hearing you, for then I did not think these two were ghosts. I reached the gate and opened the bar, and then I slipped behind the piles of wood, then in the shadow of the carts, till I got to the great water-vat. Behind that there is, as you know, just room to pass, and I had squeezed through, when I found them returning. I kept still, hoping, praying they would not come to my side of the vat, and they did not. They walked past the opening, but were still in sight; the moonlight fell full upon them. He stepped up on to a fallen pillar, turned his face to the light, raised his eyes and hands to heaven, and then I saw it was a ghost. I thought I was dead, I turned so cold; and then I shrieked, and covered my eyes. When I took away my hands they were gone.’

'Gone?' Wanda said. 'Where?'

'Gone! Vanished! Not a trace, not a sound, left. I was so frightened that I found my limbs trembling, and I thought I should fall, so I put my hand in the vat and sprinkled some water on my face. This gave me a little strength, and I flew up here. I do not know how I ever got here. I remember only flying through the corridors, cold with fear, feeling that something was behind me. Then I shut the door, and crouched on the floor, with a circle drawn around me, for Louis says no ghost will ever come under a circle drawn with three *Ave Marias*.'

Wanda had listened to this story with breathless attention. Now she said, putting her hand on the 'girl's shoulder :

'Did no one come when you shrieked like that, since everyone in the Castle must have heard it?'

'Only the Countess. Your mother came to the door of this room. I heard her coming, and I thought I should die of fright. She listened for a moment, then tapped, then said so low, almost in a whisper :

"Wanda."

'Yes, yes; and did you answer? What happened?' Wanda asked impatiently.

'Yes, I answered, going to the door, but I did not open it. Then the Countess tapped again. I opened the door ever so little. .

"Is that you, Zeka?" the Countess asked.

"Yes, Nobleness," I said.

"Does Wanda sleep?" she asked.

"Yes, Nobleness."

"Did you hear anything?" she said; "something disturbed me."

"Yes, Nobleness ; something like a dog's howl."

"Good-night, Zeka."

"Good-night, Nobleness."

'And then she went away, only a few seconds before you came in. Oh, Wanda, if you had come when the Countess was at the door, what would have become of us?'

Her young mistress shuddered.

'But you, Wanda, you are happy? You saw him ; he loves you, and you love him. Oh, it is like the story Wolska the gipsy told us. In her story the lover turned out to be a prince, and——'

'Stop,' said Wanda, rising. 'Help me to bed, Zeka. I am ill ; I can hardly stand. There, lay me down. Good-night. Oh that one might sleep for ever ! Would then this pain here stay on? There, leave me now, dear Zeka. Good-night.'

But the maid, who had been undoing the garments fastened at her mistress's neck, had touched something, which had, at the same time, caught her eyes and filled them with pleasure.

'Oh, Wanda, how beautiful !'

'What?' Wanda said, putting her hand to her throat and feeling the chain. 'Take it away,' she said. 'Zeka, it chokes me ; take it off !'

For a moment she pulled at the fine chain, which resisted her efforts. Then a tenderness came to her face and moistened her eyes. She put the little toy to her lips and kissed it, and then her hand fell heavily to her side, and faint and weary, she slept.

CHAPTER III.

‘IF YOU LOVE ME, PRAY THAT I MAY DIE.’

NOTHING could shake Zeka's belief in the ghost. Warda reminded her of the many apparitions their scared fancy had conjured up in belated rambles in the woods long ago—ghosts which had turned out to be white stones glittering in the moonlight, or dwarf trees, or patches of light falling between the branches; and the priest had questioned her closely on the errand which took her, at that time of night, to the courtyard, especially as the Countess had given orders that no one should leave the house after sunset. The girl found it difficult to give a satisfactory explanation without implicating her young mistress, which she was most careful not to do, and a less ready wit would have found the difficulty insurmountable; but Zeka was seldom long at a loss for a good excuse, and now, dropping her eyes and assuming a penitent look, she confessed that she had gone to the court to test the faith of her sweetheart by dropping the three magical stones in the water-vat by the light of the full moon; that her charm had worked with such success that the wraith of her lover had appeared, and frightened her nearly to death. But she would promise the good *cure* never, never to disobey again, for these superstitious

rites were strictly forbidden. The *curé* dismissed her with a scolding, and she, with her apron to her eyes as if in deep penitence, but really convulsed with laughter at the little drama so successfully played, flew to tell the story to Wanda.

But when she reached her mistress, her merriment was turned to anxiety and sorrow. She found the young Countess sitting where she had left her in the morning, her breakfast untouched on the table before her, her cheek and lip colourless, her eyes sunken and red, her hands folded listlessly in her lap, her gaze fixed and vacant. She neither moved nor looked up as the door opened, and the maid stood for an instant in anxious distress; then she flew to Wanda's side.

'Wanda, my beloved mistress,' she said, 'what is this? Ah, tell me! Something dreadful has, I know, happened. Have you seen what I saw? Wanda, my dear, do not let that distress you in this way. Père Béton says these are fancies of the brain, made by the evil one to send from our minds good thoughts. Ah, Wanda! I know you have seen the terrible apparition, and it has turned your heart to stone.'

In answer, Wanda rose and locked the door of the little chamber. Then she sat down and turned upon her maid a face of misery terrible to see, replacing the childish joy of old. Zeka dropped on her knees before her mistress.

'Wanda, my beautiful, what is it? Can I help you? You know I would die for you!'

'Zeka, if you love me, pray that I may die. Do you remember the bird we found in the wood long ago, with its poor little wing broken? How its heart fluttered

when we took it up! How bruised and wounded it was, and how it shrunk in agony when we touched it ever so gently! Do you remember, Zeka, you said it would be more merciful to kill it and to put it out of its pain than to keep it living the little time nature could bear the strain? Well, Zeka dear, I am wounded, crushed, and my heart is breaking. It is more merciful to pray that I may die. Pray for it, Zeka. I can have only a little life of agony to live, and bruised and wounded as I am I cannot bear any hand—even yours, dear Zeka—to touch my grief.’

Zeka sprang to her feet.

‘What is it, my mistress? Who has dared to make you suffer like this? He—is it he? Then he, not you, shall die! Casimir—’

‘Hush-sh, Zeka!’ Wanda said, putting her hand up. ‘You put my terror into words. Now listen. What has happened is through my own fault. I have sinned—I must suffer. I never should have gone on, as you know I have in this matter, without my dear mother’s knowledge; and with her advice, nothing painful could have happened. You said this yourself, Zeka. Now, it is too late—I dare not tell her now. And I must live on with my trouble ten times harder to bear—because I must conceal it from her, from my brother, from the world, and shut it up in my heart. And, Zeka, though I should never think of him again—for he is unworthy of it—I cannot tear his image from my heart, I cannot pray but I see him, I can think of nothing that excludes him. It is like a wound that burns into my soul, and will let me think of nothing but the pain. Zeka, it would be happiness to die. I pray for it. I beg death to come and relieve my poor thirsting heart.’

The childlike face was convulsed with agony pitiable to see.

Zeka, amazed, stood like one stricken with fear. Ignorant of the world and its human histories, no solution offered to solve the secret of her mistress's distress. All she knew of lovers she had learnt with Wanda, from the few novels they had read together, or from the stories told them by the gipsies. None of these prepared her for a situation like the present. In the two weeks which had passed since their first meeting with the stranger in the wood, she had rejoiced in the new-found happiness of her beloved mistress. Each night after the rendezvous at the rocks she had welcomed her back, radiant with joy, and had devoured greedily every word vouchsafed her.

She had come to regard him—the lover—as the prince from the gutter world who was to claim the fairest of the fair, and her mistress as the princess who was to marry and live in a fairy palace ever afterward. Now all this had seemingly ended in disaster. The Countess had returned from her last interview crushed, stricken down from her sweet childish happiness, her life seemingly marred, her beauty and her love seemingly blighted. What could this mean? Could it be that he did not love her? Impossible, thought the little maid, in her loyal devotion. She sat down at her mistress's feet. She took the little brown hand, cold and irresponsible. She kissed it, and then Wanda seemed to become conscious of her presence.

'Zeka,' she said, laying the cold hand upon the girl's head; 'how good you are to me, how tender and how true! You ought to know my sorrow as you did my

happiness. Listen, dear; I will try to tell you. Do not speak till I come to the end.'

Zeka gently took the hand from her head and kissed it.

'Zeka,' Wanda said, 'I believe there are many things known by those who live out in the world that we also should know, but of which we are ignorant; and there is much in which we take pride of which we should be ashamed. When things hurt us, we are fierce, we glory in revenge, we are boastful of the hatred we feel toward our enemies, and we never seek for the good but always for the bad side of their characters. I am sure it is best to learn how to subdue our fierce tempers and to try to be calm, no matter what happens. Well, dear, he and I were mistaken in one another on a certain subject. There was something he had to tell me that made me wild with anger, and I was like a mad thing. He did not know that what he had to tell me would cause me such agony. On the contrary, he thought it would give me happiness. Well, I think I was insane in my mad and unreasonable fury. I called him a name so terrible, so unjust, so insulting, that had I said it to one of our people—our men—he would have killed me. I know now I was ungenerous. I know what he must think. I cannot speak the word I called him. And he—ah, Zeka! I shall never forget his face! Had I been a man, the word would have been my last; but for me, a woman, he is too brave, too noble to feel anything but pity, and, I am sure, contempt. Pale as death, he stood and listened to my mad words, and when I turned from him, and in my stubborn pride walked up the path, he followed silently, protecting me even then. All the way up, almost to the gate, he saw me in safety. Your

shriek seemed a cry from my own heart. I fled almost unconsciously home. I never turned to see what had become of him ; and now I shall never see him more—never be able to tell him that living or dying I shall regret what I said, what I did.'

'But, Wanda,' Zeka said through her tears, 'if you are in the wrong, you will tell him so, and he will forgive you.'

'I was wrong to insult him, Zeka ; but right in parting from him—right ! There was nothing—no other course possible. I cannot tell you all now, dear ; but you would see the position as I do, in all its hopelessness, if I could explain.'

'I cannot believe that, Wanda—I shall not believe it. If he is good and noble, and you are also, what can part you ? Do, my beloved Wanda, try to look more hopefully upon this separation. I feel sure all will be right. And, my beloved Wanda, try to look less unhappy. Your mother desires you to go with her to the village to open the festivities, and to be at the blessing of the harvest. You must eat, and try to look more yourself. There, dearest, I am sure you will do your best for your mother's sake—for all our sakes. Here, some one is coming ; do not let them see a woebegone countenance.'

It was only a servant with a message from Countess Stetzka, desiring her daughter to dine alone or with Casimir, as she was engaged particularly, but would be ready at three o'clock to go to the village, and Zeka was to wait and accompany them.

Glad of the opportunity of remaining in her chamber, Wanda was persuaded to take some food, and then or rest till the hour for their expedition

Down the hill, over the river, a mile or more across the plain, brought you to the village of Radna—an open space which ought to have been a green, but which was a bare, well-worn yard or court, bounded on three sides by cabins, rude as possible for human habitations to be, the space looking toward the south nearly filled, to complete the square, by waggons, ploughs, and carts, and the few implements of agriculture owned by the poor peasants. On the north side of this little group of cabins, forming a defence against the cruel winds and snow-storms soon to come, the hay was stacked, fuel was piled, and cattle were housed.

Just now, in the late September, the peasants were preparing for their harvest fête. The corn had been threshed, the hay long stacked, the grain and cereals buried for the winter; the wood had been cut and piled, and the young people had made their garments for the cold weather. All this had been done some time, and preparations for the very humble little fête had been completed, when news of the arrival of an unusual force of soldiers at a military station near caused consternation amongst the villagers, and recommended a suspension of the festive arrangements. The priest and the Countess supported the older and wiser members of the little community in this decision, but the youths and maidens were impatient and inclined to disobey, and it was, therefore, a great relief to hear from a reliable source that the soldiers and officials stationed at Britzka were not allowed to visit the villages, and that they were under orders from their superiors not to cross the rocky boundary which divided the lands and park of Radna from the estate of Britzka. This information, accompanying an assurance that neither

Some uneasiness was still felt by Countess Stetzka as to the wisdom of holding anything, however innocent, of the nature of a national festivity under the very eyes of a strong force of Cossacks and of a whole nest of petty officials, watching, and on the slightest pretence ready to pounce down on the simple flock and devour them. It was at places of public resort that collisions between the people and the miserable wretches sent to watch them generally occurred. A Polish maiden dared not refuse to dance with a Russian soldier or Government official, though every step was watched, jealously watched, by father, brother, or lover, or all three. She knew that the slightest familiarity on his part, the suspicion of encouragement on hers, would lead to a quarrel, and probably to ruinous consequences to herself and to her family; and it was, therefore, with some reluctance and hesitation the Countess had at last yielded consent to be present at the blessing of the harvest and the thanksgiving in the little church.

The weather was unusually warm, or at least mild, for late September. The sky was cloudless, and the gaily-decorated peasants, as they flitted about the hamlet, looked part and parcel of the conical-topped hay and straw ricks, on which were flaunting flags and gay colours, in honour of this single day of festivity kept up by the peasants of Radna.

Countess Stetzka, accompanied by her daughter, and

escorted by the few servants who formed the establishment of the Castle, left Radna's gates just after the early dinner usual in Poland, and, walking down the steep descent from the main entrance, found the only vehicle possessed by the family waiting her below.

Wanda and her mother and Zeka took advantage of this as far as the chapel on the outskirts of the village, and then the Countess and her party joined the little procession which had come out to meet them, and all entered the church.

Mass had been said in the morning as usual, and now the harvest-offerings lay at the feet of the aged priest, who devoutly asked for blessings upon the efforts of the husbandman, and for patience to bear the many sufferings inflicted upon his poor little flock; and it was late when the congregation were dismissed after hearing benediction, when Wanda's beautiful voice thrilled all who heard her, as she joined the 'O Salutaris Hostia,' and sang with an earnestness that, to Zeka, sounded like the wail of a suffering heart.

When the party reached the hamlet, the tables were all prepared with the hot steaming dishes of the feast, and the Countess felt that her presence rather retarded than advanced the festivities. So, after partaking of bread and wine, and wishing all God's blessing for the coming year, she and Wanda took their leave, accompanied by old Louis, who acted as bailiff, steward, and butler at the Castle.

As mother and daughter passed the peasants and their children, hands were stretched out, and the blessings of all invoked upon the beloved mistress, made dearer to these poor people by her sorrow.

As the Countess and her daughter approached the vehicle which was to convey them back to Radna they observed a group of men surrounding the little carriage, and were somewhat surprised and startled at one of the number coming rapidly forward, and now blocking the path—a handsome youth, dressed in the picturesque costume of a Cracovian peasant. Tall and straight, with thick black hair falling to his shoulders from a square-crowned cap, the brim or band of which was of fur, the youth had fine features and a firm mouth just shadowed by a faint moustache. His tall figure was completely enveloped in a loose great-coat, made of some white wool stuff like the material of a fine blanket, which garment was elaborately braided at the neck and upon the sleeves with coloured wools, open from throat to waist, where it was held fastened by a many-tasselled girdle. Underneath this the young man wore a shirt of snowy whiteness, just visible at the neck and cuffs; high boots, all wrinkled in the leg, met the long coat and disappeared under it; and, as he stood before the Countess with bowed head, he made a most picturesque figure.

For a moment Madame Stetzka was startled, but the next she joined Wanda in smiling recognition.

'This is unwise—imprudent, my son,' she said, as he kissed her hand. 'You will return with us?'

'That would be unwise, little mother, if you will. Here I am perfectly safe. I am the son of old Michael Michaelovitch. We are of Cracow; we visit friends here, and we can speak no word of any language but our own. We would pass the evening at the fête. Do not be alarmed. At the first intimation of danger, I

will hie me home to my hiding ; but this one evening, my mother, let me stay with my friends.'

As he spoke, an old man came from the group and, bowing low, kissed the hands of both mother and daughter.

'Trust him to me, Countess,' he said. 'I will myself see Count Casimir to the gates of Radna in safety.'

'Do, mamma, let him stay,' pleaded Wanda. 'There can be no danger here ; they will all take care of him.'

Thus entreated, the Countess gave way, and pursued her walk to the drosky. When they alighted from the rude vehicle in front of the Castle, they turned and looked back upon the scene below.

The sun had set, and there was a wintry glow in the west, promising the shepherd a dry to-morrow. The great rolling plain before them was colourless, and nothing of the gay scene they had witnessed was visible in the twilight, except the smoke slowly curling upwards which marked the village ; and the party were turning towards the gate of the Castle, when a red flame shot upward with a flash of light, and gave to the hamlet, with its sentinel-like stacks, a brilliant background.

Higher and higher the blaze darted up, lapping the smoke with fiery tongue, bursting great flame-bubbles, and sending high into the rapidly darkening sky fierce spikes of lurid red.

Then a cheer from the assembled villagers came floating over the plain, and the light breeze brought up the suppressed strains of the '*Bęejz a Spółksa*,' the National hymn, which, though contraband, and its singers punishable by exile, is still the beginning and the end of all ceremonies and festivities in Poland. The song

sounded to Wanda like the funeral march of her dead love, the burial of her young heart. She could not withstand this last appeal to her emotions. She burst into tears, turned, and fled to the house, leaving her mother in profound amazement at such unusual conduct on the part of a child she had thought yet ignorant of sorrow.

Following her daughter, she encountered Louis, who had preceded them to the house by some minutes. He had, she knew, met Wanda, and she paused a moment to ask him for any explanation he might be able to give.

'What is this, Louis?' she asked, as the old man stood with bent head before her.

'My mistress,' he answered, 'I have been observing the child all day. She looks ill and terribly anxious. It is my opinion'—here he lowered his voice and looked around—'it is my opinion that she knows all.'

'Good heavens!' said the Countess. 'Louis, you should have told me this at once. Poor darling!'

Hastily the mother followed to her daughter's room, where she found that Wanda had thrown herself upon her bed, and that her hands and head were burning hot.

'My child—my darling!' she said, 'you are ill, and I have known nothing, seen nothing of it. God forgive me! I have neglected you. My thoughts seem entirely full of one subject, and I am guilty of forgetting all else. What is this, my child?'

'I think I must be ill, little mother. It is nothing serious, I hope, for your sake. I am only very weary now—so tired! If I may be quite alone and quiet, I shall be better. Do not be anxious, my brave, sweet mother. I know all you have to think of, all you suffer.

Let me sleep now ; leave me to Zeka ; I shall be better to-morrow.'

'Zeka is not here, as you know, dearest. I will go and send Lida to you for the present—you must go to bed. I will come back immediately. There, my love, lie still here for a few moments, and I will bring you something to quiet that little fluttering heart, which is beating up a fever.'

She smoothed her daughter's pillow, and, in deep anxiety, left her. The look of tearful sorrow in her child's face and in eyes seldom seen without a merry smile, the pitiful effort to cheer and reassure, the entire change from gay, bounding childhood to responsible womanhood, all this, fortunately for Wanda's secret, the mother attributed to the sorrow and anxiety which was weighing her own heart down, and which she had hoped to bear alone. She could not lighten her burthen by sharing it with these dear ones. She therefore prayed that they might be ignorant of the terrible weight she bore.

When Casimir parted from his mother, he immediately joined the villagers, and gladdened young and old by his presence and his kindly help.

The elders were seated around the rude and hastily improvised table, some forty or fifty in number, whilst the youths and maidens helped them to the repast, and had also to keep the children supplied and satisfied. These latter were huddled as near as it was safe around the bonfire, upon which dry fagots were continually piled, and in the light of which the various groups looked weird and picturesque in the extreme. Back and forth from children to elders the dishes were passed, till there seemed little chance for those who would come after, and

who now so willingly and cheerfully served their parents and grandparents with the only really substantial meal of the year.

At last the old people began to rise and give place to their children, who seemed more anxious for the repast to be over than they were for the food, and presently the table was lifted by strong arms and put back, and a place cleared for dancing. Then the real pleasure of the evening began. The gipsies, hitherto excluded, were brought in—men, women, and children, who greedily devoured what was left of the banquet, and were expected to pay their footing by furnishing music for the dance and telling fortunes *ad libitum*. The copper-coloured children crept into corners and under seats with some fragment of food with the contentment of a dog with a bone; men and women, dark, handsome, and wild, sat upon the piles of fagots and wood, and, independent of knives and forks, finished everything in the shape of food bestowed upon them. These made a dusky background for the fair Polish youths and maidens, who, in an inner circle, prepared space for dancing and arranged seats for the comfort of those who remained only as spectators. Now all was ready, the music struck up, the young men selected partners, and dancing began.

The old people looked on and listened to the violins; the dance grew more and more animated as the music quickened its measure; and now the fire, shooting great flame-tongues up into the darkness, lighted a scene of wild excitement, when suddenly the music ceased, and, as if a torpedo had exploded in their midst, the dancers were scattered hither and thither and fled out of the light into dark and obscure corners.

The old women uttered half-suppressed shrieks, and the men stood stolidly and sulkily by, regarding the cause of this sensation—four Russian soldiers, who had suddenly appeared in their midst.

‘Good-even,’ said one of the new-comers, stepping forward and speaking Polish. ‘Do not let us disturb thee, or interrupt thy amusement. The fire was seen at the station, and we were despatched to learn the cause of it, and to render assistance should it prove, as was thought, to be a village on fire.’

Not a syllable of answer was made to this, and, after waiting for a moment, the man turned to his companions and said, with an oath :

‘Curse the slaves ! They deserve to suffer for this insolence. Here, you,’ he continued, addressing a young man who had seated himself on the table, which still held such simple refreshments as the poor people could afford—‘here, you, give us something to drink.’

The young man addressed descended from his seat, took from the table a jug, and held it at arm’s-length toward the soldier, who took it, drank, and passed it to his companions. When all had drunk, the jug was handed back to him who had served it. He took it between his finger and thumb, lifted it up, dropped it, and, as it flew to pieces, put his foot upon the fragments.

‘Bravo !’ said a girl standing near ; but a look of fear came into the face of the woman who stood beside her, whilst a smothered echo of the word was heard in the darkening corners.

‘Thou shalt pay for this, thou Itzvan-de Murzki ; and as for thee, Maria Vilna, it is time thou hadst another lesson taught thee.’

'We fear thee not, nor thy masters,' the girl spoke out. 'Thou canst but make us suffer, and that is our pride.'

An angry altercation, joined in by the entire youthful population, ensued, and hot words seemed likely to lead to something more serious, when one of the men, who seemed in command of the party, entered upon the scene and secured order.

All this time Casimir, who had been amongst the dancers, was hidden behind a huge pile of fagots. He could hear what was going on, and Zeka, who kept him in sight, was in terror lest he should take part in the quarrel; and it was with great relief that she saw him, in company with a Zingari youth, leave the enclosure and disappear in the darkness beyond. At almost the same moment one of the revellers threw fagots on the fire, and in the light of the great blaze which burst forth the Russians left the place.

Zeka grew alarmed; Casimir would be seen, she thought, and recognised in this bright light. An encounter would be fatal. Could it be prevented? She stepped out of one of the openings between the cabins. She might find her master, and warn him of the danger before the strangers could make their way in the fitful light to the gipsy-waggon, where she knew she should find Casimir and his friend. She would urge his immediate return to Radna. She knew that it would be unsafe for him to again appear at the fête, and she had observed the reluctance with which he had followed his companion away from the scene, which had changed from one of merriment to great alarm and anxiety.

Once outside the enclosure, she found herself in dark-

ness. The cabins shut in the light from the bonfire, which threw flashes overhead, and tipped the tallest haystacks with crimson, sent great sparks floating off with the breeze, and paled the stars and the rising moon. Zeka almost groped her way to the path that led to a spot at which she hoped to find her young master. She was in a labyrinth of carts, ploughs, piles of wood and fagots, from which in the darkness she found it difficult to extricate herself; and she was beginning to feel frightened at her situation, when suddenly diving under a heavy waggon, she came upon the very path she was seeking. Leaving the village behind her, she was about to run down this road, when before her the white track was obstructed only a few paces off by an object which seemed to spring from the darkness, till she shrunk in terror at what appeared to be a ghostly figure approaching her.

As she left the path and placed herself in deeper obscurity, something passed, and then between the light and herself she perceived a cloaked figure, which had, as it emerged from the dim darkness, assumed the shape of a man.

He paused at each step, as if listening for a signal. He walked back and forth; sometimes she could have touched him, so close did he pass her by. Was it Casimir? and if not, who was it, and what was his errand? What did he wait for? Did this mean fresh danger to her master? If so, what could she do to avert it?

Nothing was to be seen or heard of the strangers who had disturbed and broken up the evening's amusement; no sound but the voices of the assembled peasants in

conversational tone reached her. The music was hushed, the fire was evidently dying down; all would soon be still. Then who was this who hovered on the scene—now walking a few steps, now pausing, then peering down closer to the earth, as if anxiously expecting, waiting for some one?

As her eyes became better accustomed to the darkness, she became convinced that it was Casimir. It was his walk and gesture. And what had she been thinking of! Why had she not thought of this before? It was Casimir watching, to be sure that the coast was clear, before he returned to the villagers. Convinced of this, she stepped again out into the path.

'Casimir,' she whispered.

He stopped, and through the darkness she saw a movement of his hand to his side. This decided her. It was her master; who else wore a sword? She softly repeated his name.

'Yes,' the figure whispered back, coming to meet her as she approached.

In the few seconds it took the man to reach her, a great fear had taken possession of the poor girl. Too late she felt rather than saw her mistake. It was not Casimir, and she had compromised her master's safety by speaking his name and disclosing the fact of his presence at the village. She did not shriek—she turned and would have escaped into the darkness; but a hand was laid upon her shoulder, and she knew escape was impossible.

'Hush—hush!' the man said. 'Make no noise. Listen! Where is your mistress?'

'Oh, let me go; please let me go!' the girl sobbed. 'I

know nothing about things you want to learn. I was waiting for——'

'Your master, probably, to warn him of danger. Quite right. Now if you want your freedom, answer my question. Where is your mistress?'

'At home, Excellency,' Zeka said. 'My mistress and Countess Wanda left this about five or half-past. They went to Radna.'

'I thought as much. Yet I was informed that both were here this evening. Now, listen to me. First, do you not know me?'

'No, Excellency.'

He struck a taper, and by its light, extinguished instantly, Zeka recognised the stranger whom she had seen twice before—her mistress's lover. She suppressed an exclamation.

'Now,' he said, 'take this piece of paper. Give it to Wanda, and tell her this—do not forget one word. Tell her I heard that she and her mother were here to-night; that I feared disturbance, and came to protect them. Tell her those she loves best are in danger; that a prisoner has escaped, and close search will be made for him, and that they will begin with Radna to-morrow. Do you understand?'

'Every word, Excellency. And I will deliver your message and this paper before I sleep. Good-night.'

'Good-night.'

He was gone, vanished into the darkness, and Zeka was left standing alone, with the paper in her hand and her mind and heart full of disquieting thoughts. For a moment she remained where he had left her. She heard distant voices, but whether they came from the

village or from the direction her visitor had gone she could not make out; and as she listened she heard the beating of a horse's hoofs upon the soft path which led to the main road. The sounds became less and less distinct, and she knew that the stranger was riding away. Back to the village she turned, weary and dazed, and when she reached the enclosure she found the revellers preparing to break up. Many of the old ones had already retired, and her uncle, at whose cottage she was to have passed the night, had been in search of her.

'I missed thee,' he said, 'just after the soldiers left us. I thought they had taken thee with them. Where hast thou been? Thy aunt is vexed at thee, and thy hiding.'

'Uncle,' Zeka said, speaking low, 'I was anxious about Count Casimir. I feared the Russians might meet him. I thought the soldiers were perhaps looking for him. I went out to watch, but I could not find him. Did he go home?'

'I know not. After they left there was little more dancing. Everyone lost heart after their visit, and Maria Vilna and Itzvan de Murzki have roused their anger now, and we shall suffer for it; but come in, child. It is time thou wast in bed.'

'Uncle,' Zeka said, 'I must return to the Castle to-night. Wilt thou go with me?'

'Nay! but thou'lt not return to Radna to-night. The Countess said thou'dst stay with thy aunt and me, because it would be too late for thee.'

'I cannot stay. I must go back. Do, uncle, come back with me. There is danger for Casimir. I must go and tell my mistress, and I cannot go alone.'

'Danger, is there? Well, well, child, I will go with

thee; but thy aunt will fear to have me on the road so late as it will be when I come back.'

'Stay, then, at Radna. I will get Louis to give thee a bed. He will be waiting for Count Casimir, and will let us in.'

'Well, well, I will tell thy aunt she is not to expect us back, and I will go with thee.'

The old man went into one of the cabins, not sorry to have an excuse for remaining the night at the Château, where he was sure of a good breakfast, and Zeka joined the few peasants who still sat around the dying embers of the bonfire discussing the events of the evening. The elders predicted trouble from the visit of the Russians, but a young woman remarked it required no prophetic insight of the future to see trouble in the outlook. Nothing else ever came to their little corner of the earth from the great outer world, and, sooner or later the wolf would come to drink at the stream.

Maria Vilna, the girl who had been so defiant to the Russians, sat moodily beside the young man who had insulted them by treating the drinking-cup as unclean after they had used it. They were speaking in low tones when Zeka came up. They grew silent when she joined them, and both stood up as she spoke:

'Good-night, Maria Vilna, and thou, Itzvan de Murzki. Good-night. May no harm come of what thou didst say and do this evening. It was brave of thee both, but, alas! it does no good to our blessed cause, and may bring trouble to thee.'

As she finished speaking she stood beside the fierce young woman, whose unusual height became evident compared to that of the little Zeka—a tall, gaunt figure,

clothed in a single garment, which hung from square shoulders to the ground. This was interrupted, but not bound or confined at the waist, by a rope, the two ends of which, knotted at intervals of a few inches, made the most original and fantastic of cincture. The sleeves of this curious dress were rolled up to the elbows, and the bare arms thus exposed showed a muscular development startling to see in a woman. As she stood now in the dim firelight, she presented a figure unique and impressive. And as Zeka ceased speaking, she threw her head back, clasped her hands, which hung before her, and as if speaking to the stars, dimly visible through the smoke, she said vehemently:

'Trouble to me! Trouble to Maria Vilna, who has been whipped publicly for trying to save an old mother from outrage, an infant brother from a cruel death—whipped for being a woman, and for shedding tears. No, no; there is no more trouble in this world for Maria Vilna—only revenge and death. See, this is my book.' She held up the knotted cord. 'Here I keep my accounts. I tied another knot to-night. There are many before it—see; and these three, look, they were untied when——'

'Hush!' the man De Murzki said, taking the woman's arm, and turning to lead her away. She, muttering 'Yes, three untied and another to-morrow,' was led to a cottage, and disappeared in the dark doorway.

Zeka stood horror-stricken at the savage outburst she had just listened to. She knew Maria Vilna. They were both natives of Radna; but Maria's family had gone to Petersburg and afterwards to Moscow, and she had only recently returned to her native village alone, after a term of imprisonment for political offences in which her

entire family had been involved, and for which they had one and all suffered death from the severity of the treatment they had received whilst on their way to Siberia.

Strange stories were whispered about this woman, made savage by the cruelty of the strong—stories of mysterious disappearance for weeks, and of sudden reappearance, when she would shut herself up in her father's long-vacant cabin, and for days refuse all food, except the coarsest crust. Then she would reappear with a knot of the singular girdle untied, go to the fields and work for some peasant who most needed her help, or to the forest and cut wood, and come home with a burthen of fagots beyond the strength of the strongest man in the hamlet. These stories had reached the Château, but they were thought exaggerated, and Zeka had never seen anything unusual or extraordinary till to-night; and this scene so frightened her, that when her uncle came to remind her that it was time to start, if they intended to reach the Castle before morning, she could scarcely speak, and nothing but the recollection of the message she had to take her mistress, and its probable importance, gave her courage to begin the long dark walk. She took the old man's arm, and they silently left the enclosure, and in a few moments were beyond all sound of life, except the barking of some dog shut in for the night.

CHAPTER IV.

BIRDS OF PREY.

SCARCELY a word was spoken between Zeka and the old peasant who trudged by her side during the long walk to the Castle. The moon, well up in the heavens, lighted their road and the surrounding country, and Radna's towers and walls looked grand and gray in the soft light.

It was late when they reached the gate, and their knocking sounded feeble and impotent upon the massive doors, and would have remained unheard, but that the old Louis was waiting for his young lord, Casimir, who seemingly still lingered with his Zingari friends.

Louis was cross enough to find that he had hurried down with all speed to open gate and unbar door to the pert Zeka. But a few words from her changed his humour to terror, and he lighted a lantern and hastily conducted her to the apartments of her mistress.

A slight tap from Louis was answered, to Zeka's surprise, by Madame Stetzka.

'Zeka!' exclaimed the Countess. 'What brings you back? You were to have remained.'

The presence of Countess Stetzka in her daughter's apartment was so unlooked for that Zeka was for a

moment speechless. The note she bore was for Wanda, and must be given to no other; and how else could she account for her return to the Castle, save by giving the message? Then, seeing that the Countess stood anxiously waiting for an answer, the girl stammered out, getting courage as she proceeded:

‘Nobleness! There were soldiers at the fête after you left. Four Cossacks, and Maria Vilna and Itzvan Murzki quarrelled with the soldiers.’

‘And Casimir?’ the Countess said hurriedly.

‘Oh, Casimir went away the moment the soldiers appeared. Zillah, the Zingari, took him away. Then, Nobleness, I went out to look after him, and some one in a long cloak met me. I thought it was Casimir, till he spoke, and then I was dreadfully frightened; but he made me stay to take a message. He said I was to tell you, Nobleness, that there would be a search-party at the Castle to-morrow. Then he——’

‘He! Who?—who told you this?’ the Countess interrupted.

‘I do not know, Nobleness. A young man in a long cloak. He said I must lose no time—that life and death depended upon this message being delivered at once.’

‘But who—who told you this?’ the Countess asked again, her face white as ashes. ‘You know all the neighbours.’

‘It was no neighbour, mistress. It was a stranger, dressed like an officer.’

‘A stranger? A Russian?’ asked the Countess.

‘Russian!’ repeated the girl, a new light breaking in upon her. ‘Russian! Surely not, when it was against the soldiers he came to warn us.’

The Countess stood for a moment, candle in hand, thinking, then she said :

‘Go you, Louis, and watch for the return of your master, Casimir. Tell him this news the moment he comes in. You, Zeka, go to bed here, in your mistress’s room. I have given her a sleeping-draught. I will leave the lamp burning, and come again in a few hours.’

She stepped cautiously to the bedside, stooped over the sleeper and listened, then slowly left the apartment.

Zeka seemed for some moments buried in thought.

‘That is the cause of my poor Wanda’s sorrow, then,’ she said. ‘He is Russian! But if he loves her, and she loves him! surely he cannot help being born in Russia. If he has a Polish heart—and I am sure he has—why, he can change all else. There are only his garments to change. But the Countess and Casimir—they would never listen to it. Oh! my poor, poor darling! this it is, then, that is killing thee!’

The faithful young face was bent for a moment over the sleeper, and then she began to prepare for bed. As she did so, she found the scrap of paper entrusted to her for her mistress. It was crumpled now, and the pencil-writing on the outside scarcely legible.

‘I wonder what it says,’ Zeka mused, as she went on with her preparations for the night. ‘She said he was kind and gentle, even when she was fierce and impatient. Who could be anything but kind to her, poor dear? Sleep well!’

Again she bent over the pillow, which she smoothed. Then she went to bed, and both young creatures slept profoundly—Wanda, no doubt, aided by the draught her

mother had given her; Zeka from fatigue and the reaction of the excitement of the day.

Both were still sleeping when, at daybreak, the Countess, looking worn and weary, returned, and cautiously regarding her daughter for a moment again, silently left the room.

Zeka, disturbed, looked up just as her mistress was departing, and the recollection of the little note addressed to Wanda flashed into her mind. She could scarcely restrain her impatience to look for it till the Countess had gone out of the door. Then she bounded up.

Her heart gave a leap as she saw it lying where she had left it, on the table beside her mistress's bed. She seized it, and had only returned to bed, when Countess Stetzka again entered the room. She put her hand on Zeka's shoulder, and the girl uncovered her head and looked up.

'Zeka,' whispered her mistress, 'will you see that Wanda is kept quiet all the morning? I shall be occupied till about ten; then I will come again. See that she has her breakfast, and if you want me, send Louis for me. Do you understand?'

'Yes, Nobleness.'

Then again they were alone, Zeka and the sleeper. But there was no more sleep for the little maid. The contents of the note might be of the greatest importance to her mistress. Had he not said life and death might depend upon the message?—and there lay her mistress sleeping, ignorant of all this.

Zeka dressed herself hastily by the gray light just making objects dimly distinct in the room. Then she went away, and soon returned with a breakfast-tray.

Then the sun came out, and tipped the tower of the Castle with gold, and Zeka with some difficulty roused her mistress. But Wanda was listless, and obeyed her little handmaid's wishes to drink her coffee in a subdued, uninterested manner which was heart-breaking to the poor little servant.

At last, when Wanda had with difficulty been persuaded to swallow some food, and had again lain down on the pillow, Zeka began to recount the adventures of the previous evening—the bonfire, the dance, the arrival of the soldiers, Maria Vilna's and De Murzki's imprudent speech. All this Wanda listened to as if it were being read from a story-book. But when she came to her own adventure, Wanda looked up, and, as the little maid proceeded, the young mistress rose by degrees from her pillow and listened with rapt interest, and when the story ended by the production of the note, the poor child clutched the crumpled missive and pressed it to her lips.

Zeka went softly to the door and fastened it, and when she returned her mistress was greedily devouring the two faint lines of the little note, and as she returned to the bedside Wanda looked up. Holding the scrap of paper between her hands, she read :

“The Castle will be visited to-morrow afternoon. Let those you love be prepared.”

‘This is all, Zeka; not one word of—or of forgiveness. But that is, I know, impossible; and he is so good and so kind, and I to call him a spy! Look, Zeka. See how he warns us—as if a spy would do that! But no word, no message to me. Zeka, I cannot bear it. I

think I shall go mad. If I could send him one word of regret, or say one word of farewell !'

The paper dropped from her hands on the bed, and she lay back on the pillow pale and still.

Zeka stood for a moment silently watching the lovely face. Then she took her mistress's hand and kissed it.

'Give me any message you like, Wanda dearest ; I promise it shall be in his hands before sunset. Write a line and give it to me. You shall see !'

'Zeka,' the poor girl said, sitting up, 'how can you ? Where shall you find him ? Do you know ?'

'Yes. I am sure he is at Britzka ; there is no other place. Trust me, Wanda. Write a line. Here, dear—here is paper and pen. Write now ; do not lose a moment. Write what your heart dictates, my mistress. He is good and noble. I know it. Trust him—trust your own heart !'

Wanda took the pen and the *portefeuille*, and then paused.

Write as your heart dictates. What sweet counsels ! How hard to follow ! The pen paused over the paper. Then, as if resolution had gained the day, she began :

'LORIS,

'Will you forgive and forget the words I said to you ? Can you bury them, hide them away from yourself, and only let all that had gone before be remembered ? That is all I remember now in thinking of you—your tenderness, your kindness, and the love that must be no more. So long as I live I will think of you, pray for you ; and when I die, yours will be the last image in my memory. Good-bye. Let me keep the little picture.

It shall never leave the place where you put it so long as I have strength to keep it there. And I will pray for you always.

‘WANDA.’

The tears were flowing now. The colour had rushed back to cheek and lip as if she had been speaking to her lover. And, whilst she wiped away her tears, Zeka took the little paper up, folded it, and put it in her bosom. Then she removed the *portefeville*, and only in time, for a messenger arrived to say Zeka was to go to Count Casimir.

‘I will dress whilst you are gone,’ Wanda said. ‘I could not stay here quietly now. I will get up.’

‘Yes,’ Zeka said. ‘You know the note I gave you told you of danger threatening those you love. Casimir must hide.’

‘Casimir!’ Wanda said, starting up. ‘Surely, Zeka, I am not myself, to forget everything but my own sorrow! I cannot believe this to be myself, to forget for one second my beloved brother. How I hate this spirit, whatever it is, that has taken possession of me, and makes me think only of my own poor wounds and bruises, and forget those dearer than life itself! Zeka, I am like that fair coward we read of, who forsook her father and mother in danger, and fled with her lover. Surely love like that is unholy. Now, Zeka, I am going to be myself again. See, I will bury this love and plant flowers on the grave—flowers of loving memory. All my life will I try to reconcile my people to his people, that we may live together after God’s laws in peace and forgiveness.’

The beautiful girl stood beside her bed, the long white

wrapper hanging in folds around the girlish figure. Her hands and eyes raised to heaven, she looked like a young priestess making her vows before God.

Zeka stood in amazement to see this her young mistress, who within a few days had as completely enjoyed any childish amusement as the little maid herself—her mistress whom she had never seen serious for five moments together, but who changed from joy to sadness like the lights and showers of an April day.

Zeka was awed. She answered nothing, but, stepping to her mistress's side, kissed her hand, and went away. Wanda stood for a moment where the maid had left her; then she took the locket from her bosom, and kissed it. She was a woman now; love, sorrow, and disappointment—she had felt them all. The saddest and sweetest experience of a woman's life had been hers, and the sweet irresponsibility of the young had gone for ever.

Her resolution seemed to strengthen her. She dressed, and an hour afterwards she was sitting in the great room usually occupied by the family as a drawing-room, with her mother and Casimir.

Her brother was cleaning a pistol. Madame Stetzka and Wanda were packing a basket with provisions. Zeka came in from time to time with wine, bread, cold meat, and fruit. All these were being carefully stored in the hamper.

'There, there, my little mother!' Casimir said; 'I am not going to be gone the winter, and my friends, I assure you, have food, and not bad food either.'

But the Countess said:

'It is enough that the poor Zingari keep and watch you, and their food must be common and imperfectly cooked.'

Casimir laughed.

‘Certainly, it is a little rough ; but I like it. I think I am Zingari changed in the cradle, perhaps with Zillah, who is dainty and much more what a Count Stetzki should be. There, the pistol is clean and bright. Louis has my gun. Now I am ready. Why does not Zillah come, I wonder ? I must be gone before these devils get into the wood.’

These words had scarcely left his lips when, without knock or ring, the door was opened, and there stood in it a most extraordinary and picturesque figure—a young woman, nut-brown, with piercing black eyes, hair faded by the sun to the tawny auburn-colour of her skin, her throat bare, her bosom and chest covered by a chemisette white as snow, a loose jacket and skirt of embroidered blanket confined at the waist by a faded scarf.

She stood just within the door, which she closed and held behind her. Putting up her hand to impose silence, she said in Polish, speaking rapidly :

‘They have come ! They have surrounded the Castle, and are in the wood. Escape is impossible that way. You must hide in the Castle. Neither Zillah nor any of us heard a sound till old Affra saw them. Quick ! They will be at the gates in a moment !’

‘The gates are shut and fastened,’ Zeka said. ‘How did you get in ?’

‘Over the broken wall, as they can come,’ the gipsy replied. ‘Count Casimir, hide, for there is not a moment to be lost !’

Countess Stetzka had sunk into a chair at the first words of this intelligence.

‘It is not Casimir they seek,’ she had said in French,

as if speaking to herself. Then she started up. 'Go you now. Casimir is safe. Tell Louis to come here directly; and you, Zeka, see the doors are fastened, and that no one enters till Louis returns. Go quick!'

The two women went out, and Casimir shut the door and held it till Louis appeared. In the meantime, Countess Stetzka and her daughter were removing pieces of porcelain and bronze, and old jars and sabres and swords from the great chimneypiece, which occupied the entire space between the two high windows.

After Louis entered the door was locked, and the work of taking down the many old-fashioned and heavy ornaments from the chimney was completed. Then Louis and Casimir drew out the heavy stone fender, and took up a piece of the pavement; the old servant put his hand in and pulled out a bolt with difficulty. Then they went to the great cumbersome chimneypiece, pressed an iron knob, and the entire chimney swung out, and left open to the gaze of those present a small square chamber.

Into this Casimir sprang. His pistol was handed to him, and a bottle of wine put in beside the only seat the little aperture contained. Then the great portal was swung to again, the fender replaced, and the women, standing on chairs, began to put up the ornaments removed.

As they did so a panel was slid back from the inside, and disclosed the fact that some wood-carving was perforated, and the prisoner could see all that passed in the room below.

'Do not bolt me in,' Casimir said; 'I cannot stand it. I will be prudent, my little mother, never fear; but I must not be bolted in.'

'It is not necessary,' Louis said. 'The door is under your control; draw the bar at the left. No one could get it open now but yourself.'

'Yes; I understand.'

Then everything being arranged as it was before, the women began to make the room look as everyday-like as possible.

'Shall we wait them here, or go down to them?' the Countess asked Louis.

'Wait here, madam,' the old servant replied; 'they are less likely to search a room they find the family in.'

Wearily now Countess Stetzka moved, and her face was white and sad as she asked:

'Is everything ready downstairs?'

'Yes, Nobleness.'

'Then bring coffee here, Louis, and go about your usual occupation. I trust you may have time to unbar all the doors and gates, that they may think us taken by surprise.'

She sat down near the table whilst Louis removed the basket of provisions, and was leaving the room, when Casimir called out:

'See that Zillah has the basket; and tell them I shall be with them to-night—to wait for me, as we had arranged.'

'Yes, Excellency,' the old man said with bowed head as he left the room.

'Casimir,' the Countess said, speaking up to the prisoner, 'promise me, my son, that, no matter what happens, you will be prudent and quiet.'

'I promise,' Casimir said. 'Do not fear, my little

mother; I will be discretion itself, though I know how hard it is to see a wolf within easy range of one's gun and yet not dare to fire. But depend upon me, my sweet little mother. I know there are many other wolves ready to eat you up, and you can escape this one.'

'They are coming,' Louis said, bringing in a tray with coffee and biscuits, the usual afternoon refreshments in a Polish household.

The Countess and Wanda sat at the table, and they had scarcely done so when Zeka entered. Behind her was heard the tramp of two sets of feet, which paused just outside the door.

Zeka, in a tone as careless as if announcing visitors who had come to take coffee with the family, said in an unnecessarily loud voice :

'There are two officials and some soldiers below desiring to speak to your Excellency. Shall I admit them?'

Then Louis went to the door, and Zeka stepped to the table, and on pretence of arranging the tray, and whilst the Countess Stetzka's attention was drawn to the door, quick as thought she bent over her young mistress :

'Have no fear of anything,' she said. 'He is here; I gave him your letter.'

Then, whilst Wanda's face became crimson, the maid stood aside, and two men entered the room, and one came cringing up to the Countess, and presented to her a paper.

Madame Stetzka took the paper, and without looking at it said :

'I suppose this is the usual document? I need not

open it; habit has made me familiar with its contents. Do your work, and leave us again for a little rest.'

The man who had presented the paper, and whose uniform declared him to be of rank superior to his companion, came forward, leaving the other man at the door.

Cringing, and shuffling his feet on the polished floor, the first speaker began :

' You know me, Excellency ? I was here once before. I saved you much trouble then, I did. I declare to heaven, Excellency, I nearly lost my promotion for my leniency then.' Here he suddenly turned and motioned the other to withdraw. Then, when he was alone, he came closer to the women, and, lowering his voice to a whisper, he said, ' The last time, Excellency, we were only hunting out treasonable documents. Now, Excellency, an important prisoner has escaped from —, and the authorities have caused to think he came this way.'

Here he raised his eyebrows, and looked around as if he expected to see the important missing one in one of the corners.

The Countess stood immovable during this disclosure ; but Wanda saw her mother's lip tremble, and her cheek turn a shade paler.

' I do not intend disturbing your Excellency if I can possibly help it, believe me ; but my men will not be satisfied with what I received last time, and there are twelve of us now. And such orders—such imperative orders. And we have also soldiers with us.'

The Countess took from her wallet a purse, and placed it on the table.

' There is money,' she said ; ' take it and go.'

The man seized the purse, and emptied its contents

into his hand. Then, with a look of well-feigned surprise, he counted the coins, then put the money back in the purse and said, quite sorrowfully, as if it gave him pain to say it :

‘ Excellency, I could not offer this to my men—not two roubles apiece ; and I—who take all the responsibility, all the risk—I would do without myself. I declare to heaven I would ! But my men. I cannot offer them this.’

‘ Then leave it, and do your will,’ the Countess said ;
‘ I have no more.’

‘ Yes, Excellency,’ the man replied, ‘ of money perhaps ! I can understand you do not dig gold out of these rocks ; but your Excellency has something equally valuable—something my men can sell, and divide the money between them—a bit of old Stetzki plate or a jewel ; something of no use to you, only valuable, to buy my men off. This I do assure your Excellency, they have orders to make most careful search of the Castle. It is I—only I—who stand between you and grave unpleasantness !’

‘ I have nothing more for you,’ the Countess said, knowing well that only at the last moment she must give them more money, which she had ready. But this was much too early in the interview to yield. ‘ I have nothing more,’ she said ; but as she did so, Wanda, standing near the window, heard, or thought she heard, the click of a pistol. A new terror seized her. Casimir had never before witnessed one of these scenes. Would he bear this ? What if this soldier became insolent to his mother ! The girl could foresee the consequences, and the thought froze her with terror.

She rose from the table and stood between the chimney

and the man, and taking from her pocket a purse containing all her little store of money, held it out to the scoundrel, herself not moving from the position she had taken up.

The ruffian came in his cringing way forward.

‘It is not for myself, one of noble birth, I call God to witness. It is to buy off the men; to save your mother, her Nobleness, from further annoyance. That is why I ask for more. But, oh, Excellency! this is nothing,’ looking at the coins in his hand. Then, putting them back, he came towards the girl, holding-out the purse. ‘This is no use,’ he said with a sigh. ‘I am truly sorry, I call God to witness. I am sorry. The orders are most imperative to-day. Give me a jewel or a cup for my men. I know you have many things we can get the worth of—to you, worthless.’

He had now approached Wanda, who stood as if spell-bound between him and what she knew to be certain death to him—destruction to her family. She put up her hand as if to ward him back, and as she did so his greedy eyes caught a glimpse of the fine thread of gold about her neck. In an instant, and before the girl realized what he was about, he had caught the chain and pulled up, before the astonished eyes of her mother, the locket sparkling with brilliants.

‘Ah!’ he said, as the slight fastening gave way and left the jewel in his hand. ‘Ah! this now, only a toy, but this will satisfy them.’

Wanda shrieked when the villain touched her. But it was not of herself she was thinking.

‘Mother, mother!’ she screamed in French; ‘get him out of the room. My brother!’

Instantly Madame Stetzka took up the situation. Until that moment she had not thought of her son being a witness to their humiliation, and of the effect the sight would probably have upon him. Now she saw the danger, and forgetting everything else, she touched the loathsome creature's arm feebly and led him from the room.

'Lock and bolt the door,' Casimir said from his hiding-place; and Wanda, dazed and almost staggering, was obeying mechanically.

She had nearly reached the door, when the threshold was darkened by another figure. A soldier, in Cossack uniform, stood before her, one hand stretched out toward her, the other on his sword.

'Wanda, my love,' he said, 'I have had your message. I am filled with happiness and joy. All will be well. Here, take this and do what it asks you, my love, my——'

He paused, horror-stricken at the look of deathly terror which had come to her face.

'Wanda!' he cried, stepping forward.

But the girl, with a shriek, flew toward him, and, guarding his body from the bullet she felt sure was aimed at his heart, she forced him from the room. Then she fell into the arms of Zeka, who came hastily upon the scene.

'Go, go!' Zeka said. 'It is death to you, to her, if you are seen together.'

'Tell her, then—tell her not to fail me this once, the last time I shall ask her, this evening at the spring. You will tell her?'

'Yes, yes,' the frightened maid replied. 'Now go. Oh, do go!'

He went quickly along the corridor, down the great staircase, and joined the men waiting their orders in the court below.

Then Boraff also appeared, slipping down blandly with the Countess's money and poor Wanda's jewel in his pocket. He nodded knowingly to the men, then made a pretence of examining the Castle, marched them from corridor to corridor; in and out of halls and chambers, then down the great staircase, and away.

As the party emerged from the grounds of the Castle, a horseman came galloping up, leading a saddled horse. The company halted, and the rider presented a despatch to Boraff, who, with trembling fingers, opened it.

'Ivan Ivanovetch!' he called out, after reading the despatch, and, looking up at the orderly: 'there is no such person present.'

'Here,' answered a voice from the midst of the little company of soldiers.

Boraff turned sharply around. What did this mean? No such name had appeared in the list of soldiers given as escort to the search-party.

Our hero, whom we have known as Wanda's lover, stepped forward.

'You are to instantly repair to headquarters,' Boraff said, looking scrutinizingly at the other. 'You are to mount and ride back at once.'

The young officer saluted the sergeant; but, instead of instantly mounting, he said in a voice loud enough to be heard by those nearest him:

'And my share of the ransom?'

'What do you say?' Boraff asked threateningly. 'Take care, sir, what you say, or you may find rough

armlets on those white wrists. 'Fall in!' he continued to the men under his command.

'Not so fast, my friend. You will give me my share of the Countess's roubles—those you got for your men, you know. You can settle with them at your leisure; with me now, please.'

Boraff, only too glad to divide the money, finding his tormentor ignorant of his possession of the jewel, took from his pocket two roubles.

'Only twelve, I declare to heaven!' he said. 'I have nothing for myself—not a rouble.'

He would have slipped the money into the hand of the other, but the young man held out his hand, and, in the presence of all, made the scoundrel give him the two coins.

Then he turned, mounted his horse and rode away, followed by the attendant.

'Villain!' he said to himself. 'Is it any wonder these people hate us? What infamy, what crime! And it is general—this robbery. It is a system. I believe my mother is right. With God's help, I will sift and expose it.' He slackened his pace as he neared the Castle of Britzka, looked at his watch, and then rode on briskly again. 'I must return directly,' he said. 'Pray heaven, I may see her once more; then I will fly to the work nearest my heart. Ah!' he called out, greeting an officer who appeared that moment at a turning of the road—'ah, Strakosch! I am so glad to see you.'

'And I was riding to meet you,' the other said. 'Well?'

'Worse than I suspected, Strakosch. It is true to the letter, as reported, and worse. I heard the miscreant,

with my own ears, barter with these poor, most distressed people for their last rouble, as the price of disobeying his orders and of ridding the Castle of his loathsome presence. It is too horrible, and the worst consequences must follow such corruption. One consequence—and the most mischievous—is that this system of highway robbery will extend to our soldiers.' A quick glance from Strakosch was unobserved by Prince O——, who continued: 'I am satisfied the thief shared his booty with the escort, and I shall go into this. Really, life is too short to undo the harm to our Government such a single act entails, and there is no punishment too severe for the perpetrators. But, Strakosch, I am most of all surprised at the apparent indifference of our superiors on this subject. I have written out a full report and sent it to General R——, and received almost a snub for my pains. But thanks to good fortune, I can bring these matters before the highest authority of all.'

'And get sent to the Caucasus!'

This, Strakosch said as if he had spoken aloud some thought passing through his brain, and which now, inadvertently, had escaped him.

'What do you say, Strakosch? Do you think the influence of these pirates can touch me? I will bring the matter before the Czar. The Government shall be compelled to lay aside their plots and plans for the acquisition of territory—the one thing that seems to occupy them—and revolutionize all this. They should look at home, these people, whose only thought seems to be things abroad.'

'My dear Loris, let me again implore you to give up

the idea of revolutionizing all Russia and his Majesty's dominions. These things your young spirit chafes against are necessary evils, and must be borne for a time. Our Russia is young, is a fine child growing beyond our hopes and expectations—growing to the surprise of friends and to the envy and jealousy of our enemies. Russia is having her infantile diseases. These ills of which you complain are inevitable; but they will pass, and we will stand one of the strongest constitutions in the world. But you must let these little diseases work, or we shall have congestion or delirium.'

'Strakosch, I cannot agree with you. This young thing, of which you speak as infected with evils, cannot come out with a healthy constitution after diseases so corrupt and disgusting. I cannot believe that ends good or valuable are to be gained by such loathsome means. If I believed this to be the policy of the Government, or that the governing bodies knew aught of it, and left it unpunished, I should leave Russia to-morrow.'

'Knew of it, my dear Loris? *It is* the governing body. It is the Government. This is their system.'

'And the Czar?' Loris asked.

'It is a despotic autocratic Government; and I tell you frankly, Loris, I do not care to discuss the extent to which these very grievances of which you complain are traceable to the direct orders of the monarch. It is a dangerous business, this interfering with the powers that be, and I prefer keeping my own counsel. I have advised you to keep clear of all this, and fully explained my reasons.'

'But,' Loris said, 'I could not let this matter drop if I would. I could not serve either king or country, feel-

ing that I might be called to support such infamies, and to associate, even officially, with those who practise them. And, besides, there are other reasons now, Strakosch, which impel me on in this work. She and her family, most unjustly suffering, shall be saved. I will devote my life to the work till it is done. In fact, I have gone too far already to draw back. I have reported everything that I have discovered, and shall continue to do so, and——'

'This is the result,' Strakosch said, producing and handing the Prince a despatch. 'My dear Loris, I have warned you often. And now you are found troublesome, and must go home and be repentant. I tell you you must leave Horritoff alone. He will not be interfered with, and you had best make a friend of him. He is a dangerous enemy.'

'What have I to do with Horritoff, Strakosch, or he with me? I have stronger influence than he.'

'Ah, my friend, lay not that flattering unction to your soul. How long ago is it that a Grand Duke, a near relation of the Emperor's, was sent to the land of silence for change of air? It was for this same meddling with the wheels of the machinery. He was drawn in, and so will you be. Take care!'

'But, Strakosch, all the world knows—you know—I know, that it was for other and most serious offences against the Crown and his Majesty's person that he was punished.'

'Yes; and I know where these serious offences were manufactured, and so will you, to your cost. But you had best read your despatch.'

Loris pulled up his horse, and opened the ugly docu-

ment. He glanced at it, and his face paled. He read it over twice, and then looked up.

‘It is an order to report at headquarters immediately. I must reach St. Petersburg, travelling with all expedition. I shall start in the morning. In fact, I expected it, only in a different form ; for I have asked leave to go and see my mother. I shall start with the first light of day to-morrow.’

‘You must start to-night, Loris. I have imperative orders that you start to-night. • I have everything ready, and not one moment must be lost.’

‘But I must go back to Radna. Nothing shall prevent me going to fulfil an appointment I have with her.’

‘Nothing but the orders of your superior officer, sir,’ Strakosch said, assuming at once the official tone and dropping that of the friend. ‘You must leave Britzka within thirty minutes of your return now.’

The young man’s head dropped on his breast, and he sat motionless as a statue. Then he looked after Strakosch, who was slowly walking his horse away from the spot. His face was pale as death as he cantered after his companion.

‘I beg your pardon, Strakosch. I will, of course, obey your orders.’

‘The orders of the commander-in-chief,’ Strakosch replied. Then turning in his saddle suddenly, he continued, as if speaking from an impulse which had overcome his discretion, ‘Frankly, Loris, I feel this exceedingly, and would do anything in my power to save you this disappointment ; but a soldier knows no margin between obedience and the reverse, and, at whatever cost, you are bound to report at headquarters.’

‘Ah, Maurice, you little know what this may cost me! First, my sudden departure without the opportunity of explaining will confirm a suspicion affecting my honour. For, strange as it may appear, I cannot write to the Château, nor can I send a messenger. I was going to arrange this, could I have remained here till to-morrow; but now that that is impossible, I am bewildered with fears for the consequences.’

‘I will keep this rendezvous for you, Loris,’ Strakosch said. ‘As soon as I see you off, I will go to the place you direct. Nay, do not fear that I shall alarm her. I will take your message and deliver it with the respect due to an empress from a courtier.’

Loris grasped his hand.

‘Thank you, Maurice; now I will go willingly. God bless you! Should they want a friend in my absence, these poor people, stand by them, Maurice, and all my life I will be your debtor. She is nobility itself, and beautiful, and trustful, and truth itself, but a child in the ways of the world; full of the prejudices of her race—prejudices fostered and encouraged by the persecution of our Government. To-day, when I saw her for an instant, there was great terror and confusion at the Castle. She was overcome with anxiety, but there was really nothing to account for her deep emotion. So far as I could see, she was completely overcome, poor child, and fainted when she saw me. I gave her maid a note, begging my love to meet me at the old rendezvous this evening at twilight. She will be there, I believe; but should she be prevented, the maid will meet you, or you will find a letter for me in the old hollow tree. Send it after me, Maurice—do not lose an hour; I shall be

miserable till I get tidings. And you will try to see her? You will explain how it is I am forced to leave her? Tell her I will return the instant I can do so with safety to her family and myself.'

'I will do all you ask me, Loris, if it be possible. You can depend upon me implicitly.'

The elder man seemed touched by the boyish ardour and the misery of the younger; but a careful observer would have seen from the first that Strakosch either disapproved of the situation, or that there was some influence at work in his mind which prevented him giving his entire sympathy. Loris, however, saw nothing of this. His mind was too full of his own wretchedness at leaving Wanda without fulfilling the appointment he had begged her so earnestly to keep; and there were other miserable questions and doubts in his thoughts concerning the future, or the possibility of an early return, and the fulfilment of plans upon which depended the whole happiness of his life. He rode beside his brother officer with drooping head, and spoke in a tone of suffering which seemed to touch the heart of his companion.

A few moments and they both entered the gate of the old Château of Britzka, now used as a military station, and half an hour afterwards the young man rode out again, accompanied by a military escort, which, seemingly under his command, took its way across the great plains stretching out before them far as the eyes could reach.

Maurice Strakosch watched the cavalcade for a few moments, sitting motionless in his saddle; then he turned his horse's head and, followed by an attendant, rode away in the direction of Radna.

CHAPTER V.

'TURN, VILLAIN, COWARD, DOG! TURN ROUND AND FACE
YOUR DEATH!'

AFTER the departure of the soldiers from the Castle, Wanda had sought her own room, more dead than alive with the terrors of the scenes and the situations of the last hour. All was now known to her brother. All? No; not all. He had heard a Russian soldier address his sister in terms of endearment. He would know they had met, and that she had permitted the familiarity. That was enough to bar her for ever from her brother's heart. No forgiveness was possible, unless she acknowledged that she had been deceived into believing the man to be of another nation; and then her lover's life must pay the penalty of the deception he had practised. Could she rush to her brother and demand vengeance, her crime could be forgiven; but Wanda would now endure the torture of the inquisitors before she would say a word of blame against her own true love, though only a few short hours before she herself had called him spy, and had shrunk from him as if he had been a leper. The few hours she had had for reflection convinced her that his only fault was that of inducing her to keep their acquaintance secret from her mother. In this she made herself

out as much to blame as he. And, by degrees, she came to fully acquit him, then to believe him the injured one, and finally, as the danger of his position, should her brother meet him, came to her mind, she sprang up and alarmed the faithful Zeka by saying she would go to him at once.

It was fortunately near the hour when the shadows of evening made it safe for the young girl to leave the Castle without being observed in the woody paths which led to the rendezvous, and Zeka, with trembling fingers, prepared her mistress to go out. Then the maid as usual went to see if the way was clear. She returned almost immediately.

‘There is no one to be seen. I will go down with you.’

‘And my mother and Casimir?’

‘The Countess and Casimir went to the north tower as soon as the soldiers and police were out of sight, and they are there still. Lida took them dinner there. Only think of it, dinner in the old tower! She did not go in; Casimir came out and took the tray. Lida said Casimir was deathly pale, and that his hand trembled.’

Wanda listened, as if she with difficulty followed Zeka’s words, and then she said:

‘I shall go now, Zeka; wait for me outside the gate. Come!’

‘Oh, Wanda!’ the little maid implored, ‘do not be long to-night. I feel that I should die of fright and anxiety if you kept me long. I feel as if something terrible had happened, or was going to happen. And, dearest beloved, you are not well; you should not be alone one moment; and he may not yet be there! I will go down with you; do let me, my mistress!’

'No, Zeka; wait here. I shall not be long. I go to say good-bye, only that. I must go this once to say good-bye for ever. Then I will come back, dear. I will go to my mother and tell her all, then perhaps this pain here in my heart will cease. Will it, Zeka? or will it go on till I die?'

They had reached the outer gate, and the pathway which lay before them led to the moss-bound spring. All was gloom, out of which the great rocks loomed like spectres. The tall trees almost shut out what little there was left of daylight. Only a patch here and there fell between the clustering foliage overhead, and danced like vanishing spirits on the floor of brown leaves and soft mosses. The girls separated at the big sentinel rock just outside the south entrance to the Castle; that rock which quite blocked up the direct road, and around which a pathway now led on either side.

Wanda gathered her cloak about her, and wearily and slowly began the familiar descent.

What a change a few hours had wrought in this fair young queen of the woods! When last she had descended this path, her light foot had scarcely touched or crushed the soft yielding moss. She had bounded along over the path like the young spirited creature she was. But now that spirit had been laden with sorrow and grief. Her step was weary and slow, and the sweet young face was smileless and sad to look upon.

When she reached the rocks and could get a view of the enclosure, she seemed relieved, rather than disappointed, to find herself alone. Not a sound reached her. She paused for a moment, then stepped over the stones

which surrounded the spring, and sat down on a mossy seat.

Herself hidden from view, she could, through the trees, see the upper part of the path down which she had come, and on the other side she could discern the entrance to the wood and the pathway by which her lover usually entered the little amphitheatre.

She had scarcely seated herself when, far up toward the Castle, some dark shadow moved across the pathway. At first nothing was distinct enough for her to make out even the outlines, but as her eyes became accustomed to the gloom, she saw three objects moving stealthily amongst the undergrowth. There they paused. Then one came out and stood for a moment on the sloping road; then stepped forward. Another moment she recognised her brother Casimir.

As he left the two dusky figures, she strained her eyes to make them out. Impossible. They might have been shadows of human beings, so vague and dim they moved in and out of the thick underbush, now only their heads and shoulders, or the shadows of them, appearing above the lowest curve. These shadows seemed to fall on the open pathway, and then all disappeared.

Wanda crouched into her hiding-place as she saw Casimir leave these ghost-like companions, and walk slowly down the path, her terror increasing as she saw him approaching the very spot where, in a few moments, she expected to see her lover. A meeting between these two! What would that lead to? Death, she felt certain of it. In all its horror she took in the situation, and yet she could do nothing. She seemed frozen. She

could neither stir nor cry out. She felt and suffered, but her will was paralyzed. It was a nightmare!

As Casimir came nearer, his figure was lost sight of behind the big rocks which intervened, and behind one of which Wanda was hidden. Exactly opposite where she sat, the other entrance to the enclosure was in view, and from this she expected each second to see her lover emerge.

For a moment nothing happened; then a figure appeared, pausing just inside the dark archway formed by the touching branches. Wanda's blood seemed to freeze for an instant, then it rushed hot and palpitating through her veins as she perceived that the figure was not that of her lover, but of Boraff, the miscreant who had commanded the search-party that very day, and who had torn from her neck the souvenir of her lover.

He came slowly, almost stealthily, forward, his eyes on the ground, evidently looking for something. He stopped at a little cairn, which had been piled up in fantastic shapes, and planted by the children's hands with ferns. Wanda and her brother had made the cairn, and old Louis had capped it with a great flat slatestone.

There, from time to time, ferns and flowery things had been gathered up and planted in the mossy fissure, till the place began to present the appearance of a grassy mound.

This object seemed the subject of Boraff's visit, and he walked around it, peering down into its mossy covering, and touching its rugged side from time to time.

'Here,' he said at last, pausing, with his back towards

Wanda ; ' here I saw them bury the box. I saw them with mine own eyes here, at this very spot, and yet I cannot make out which of these stones have been removed. I must be cautious as they, or I shall be discovered, and should they miss the things and make a hue-and-cry about them, I might get into hot water, for there is no knowing what our officers will do next. Ah, ah ! this is the secret. This big stone comes off first, and then the treasure-house is visible.'

He stooped and tried to remove the capping-stone, but in vain. He then stood up, still with his back to Wanda, and then a gentle rustle at her right caused her to turn her head. There, above the high brown rock at her side, his head and shoulders only visible, his gun resting on the rock, aimed at the Russian, was her brother. Before she could move or speak, she heard his voice :

' Turn, villain, coward, dog ! Turn round and face your death !'

With the first word, the Russian turned his head, and the next, he threw up his hands and received the bullet aimed at his heart.

As he fell over the cairn, Wanda started forward ; she tottered an instant, then uttered a wail which chilled with horror those who heard it, then fell back upon the rock which, till now, had sheltered her from observation.

Casimir, after the discharge of his gun, forgetful of the uncertainty of his footing, stood upon the slight projection which had served to support him whilst leaning over, and tried to see from whence the shriek came. Standing upright, he swayed for a moment on this perilous perch, then with a crash fell back amongst the broken stones at the foot of the rock.

For an instant he lay still. Then two dusky figures sprang out of the bushes, hovered over him for a moment, then silently took him up and laid him on the mossy path. Out from the undergrowth they took two poles, laid them down, and spread out a great bundle of faggots upon them. On these they threw an old coat or blanket. Then they gently lifted the young man, who groaned as they moved him, laid him upon this improvised stretcher, took up the poles between them, and silently moved away.

The figures were of two men—fierce, dusky Zingaris—who bore away their well-beloved friend and protector, the young Count Casimir of Radna, on a stretcher probably intended for his enemy.

As they disappeared, three other figures came upon the scene.

Zeka came flying down the path, in answer to her mistress's voice, for she had heard the shriek and the report of the gun.

She stopped only when she saw Wanda lying as if dead on the margin of the spring. She was bathing the face of her beloved mistress when two men appeared from the opposite pathway.

They were Count Strakosch and his attendant. They came forward hastily, and never saw Boraff until they nearly stumbled over his prostrate body.

'It is Boraff, Nobleness,' the man then said to his master. 'It is Boraff, sergeant of police, that was sent this morning to Radna on duty.'

'Is he dead?' Strakosch asked.

'I fear so, Nobleness.'

Maurice Strakosch drew from his belt a small revolver,

and motioned his attendant to follow him. The Cossack obeyed, and they disappeared behind the great rock from which Casimir had aimed the bullet at his enemy.

As the officer was about to go up the path, peering before him into the darkness, a sound, as of sobbing, reached him, and he turned hastily around the great rock, and then saw indistinctly the figure of a woman stooping over something, and evidently in distress.

As Strakosch paused, trying to make out the group at the spring, Zeka raised her voice ;

'Wanda ! Wanda !' she cried, 'speak to me ; mistress beloved, speak to me ! Oh ! what shall I do ? She is dead—she is dead !'

The two men stepped forward a few paces. Then Strakosch motioned the attendant back, and himself went to the kneeling girl. As he approached, Zeka looked up.

'Thank God !' she said. 'Oh, sir, help me ! I fear my mistress is dead.'

The officer was at her side in an instant ; he lifted the slight figure into a sitting position, then laid his hand upon her heart.

'She has only fainted,' he said. 'Water !'

Zeka saturated her handkerchief in the spring, and gave it to him. He dashed it in her face, rubbed her cold hands, and laid her back upon the mossy couch. In a few seconds the girl drew a deep breath, and then he knew that she was recovering.

'What does this mean ?' he asked the little maid, now weeping piteously over her mistress. 'What is the matter with the lady ? Who fired the shot I heard ?'

'I know nothing,' Zeka answered through her tears.

'I heard my mistress shriek. I came as fast as I could, but I found her unconscious. I did not know a shot had been fired. Not at her?' she cried, springing up. 'She is not hurt? Is she hurt?'

'No,' Strakosch replied. 'The shot only killed a Russian. That, to you, is of no consequence, of course. But you may as well say who fired; for unless you do, both you and this young lady will be arrested as witnesses.'

'Killed a Russian?' Zeka repeated. 'Who killed a Russian? I know nothing. Oh, this is terrible! Who is killed? Tell me, in heaven's name! Not him? Not——'

'Only a Russian servant—the man who commanded the search-party at the Château this morning—one Boraff.'

'Oh, thank God!' Zeka said. 'I thought it might—that it was the stranger, the—— But, Excellency, look at my mistress, still unconscious. How am I to get her home?'

'You had best go to the Castle,' Strakosch replied, 'and bring assistance.'

'I cannot! I must not! They at the Castle must not know that my mistress—the Countess Wanda—is here.'

'Oh no!' he said. 'I see, I see! Well, we must try to get her back to consciousness. I——'

But he was interrupted by Wanda herself.

'Where am I?' she said, starting up and looking wildly around.

'Here, beloved of my heart,' Zeka said; 'here, at the Long Moss Spring. Oh, Wanda, beloved, try to come with me. They will miss us at the Castle. Already,

perhaps, they have heard you, for I heard you shriek, and I had gone around the hill. Oh! do try to come home!

Wanda put her hands to her eyes, as if to shut out some terrible picture. Then she said, in a wild whisper:

‘Where is he? What has happened? Casimir?’

Zeka’s hand was on her mistress’s arm, and she grasped it till the girl winced.

‘Do you see who is here?’ the little maid said in Polish. ‘What are you saying? She is wandering, Excellency. I fear for her mind, I do. Oh! do, Wanda, rouse yourself. Come home, or what will become of us?’

Wanda staggered up.

‘Who is this?’ she asked, seeing the figure of a man at her side.

‘A friend,’ Strakosch replied. Then, bending forward till she heard the low tone, he continued: ‘A friend of Prince O——. I came here for him. I have a message for you, Countess—a message from him.’

‘Yes,’ Wanda said, in a low voice. And he proceeded:

‘Prince O—— has been ordered away on duty. He left Britzka this afternoon. He entrusted me with this letter for you, and begged me to say you should hear from him daily. He left most reluctantly, most unhappily, I assure you. Now, mademoiselle, something very terrible has happened here, and I beg you will seek your home as speedily as possible. I shall do my utmost to keep you and your name out of this affair. I may not be able to do that. I shall hope to see you for a few moments at the Château to-morrow.’

Dazed and almost paralyzed with the terror she had

endured, the poor child could not take in the meaning of the words addressed to her. She put her hand feebly to her head, tried to collect her wandering thoughts, and then allowed herself to be led homeward by the trembling Zeka.

Strakosch watched them till they disappeared, and having instructed the orderly to wait beside the prostrate body of Boraff, he rode away to Britzka; and an hour afterward, a party of soldiers with a stretcher removed the remains of the wretched Boraff to the station, where an inquiry into the cause of his death was immediately begun.

CHAPTER VI.

THE WHITE CAVES.

ABOVE the Castle the rocks rise so precipitously that, looking up from the plain below, one would think that nothing living could find footing there. True, long lines of shrubs and dwarf pines marked the existence of ledges which must contain and support more or less soil, but between these green lines the gray rock shone out fair and glittering, and except where the belts of foliage seem tied together with knots of undergrowth, the eye could trace them uninterruptedly till they were lost in the curve of the mountain.

Yet it was through these seemingly impenetrable knots and along these narrow ledges that the litter bearing the young Count Casimir was carried by the dusky figures who placed him on the improvised litter and carried him away. Up, up, from ledge to ledge, along through tangled branches, on by a path made by the goat and giving little more than footing to the two men who silently bore their silent burthen. At last, near the top, they came to a resting-place—a moss-lined basin from which in some storm or convulsion of nature a great rock had been hurled. Here, sheltered by the overhanging brow of the mountain, and hidden by

close undergrowth, the litter was brought to a standstill.

Below in the valley all was dark now, and as the bearers paused and bent their ears to the ground not a sound was to be heard. Then one of the dusky figures put his fingers to his lips and imitated the whistle of a bird. Immediately it was answered, and from the dark hillside two figures emerged.

'Hallo!' said one of the bearers; 'here, quick! It is Count Casimir, wounded. Where is Zillah?'

'Here,' answered one of the new-comers, almost invisible in the gloom, and going at once to the litter, the burthen of which was silent, quickly turned the young man over, and proceeded to feel his body, arms and legs. As he did so, the poor boy groaned spasmodically, and tried to raise himself.

'Keep quiet, my master,' the acting-surgeon said, 'and drink this.'

Casimir did as he was bid, and then the two new-comers, after a whispered consultation, took up the litter; the others, preceding, moved aside the branches and led the way.

For nearly an hour after they had turned the summit, the men struggled on down the other side of the mountain, changing hands occasionally, sometimes stopping to rest and refresh their charge.

At last they came to a piece of table-land not far above the level of the plain. Here they again paused, and after listening attentively for a few seconds, they lighted a candle in a rude lantern. This, carried in front, guided the bearers to what seemed the entrance of a cave hitherto invisible in the darkness.

'Where are you going now?' feebly asked the wounded man.

'To the White Caves, my master,' the leader replied. 'We have gone into winter quarters, and it's lucky we have, for thou, my master, must have a long rest; and the winter will come early—we could not keep thee in the tents.'

'But,' Casimir said, 'I can go no farther. It is yet hours to the White Caves. I am suffering, and must have attention. I think my arm is broken.'

'No, master, nothing is broken. Thou art only cut and bruised—terribly bruised. We are already at the entrance, and can reach the inner caves by the river in an hour's time.

'By the river?'

'Yes. Zillah has now a boat—one found floating down by Britzka's ford. We have that waiting for thee, and we must on. They will be after us by dawn-light, and the cave is our only safety.'

'Go on!'

Casimir spoke hoarsely. The facts and events of the past few hours had been banished from his mind by his semi-unconsciousness and suffering; but now all flashed before him, and he took in the danger of the situation. His thoughts were soon in a whirl of confusion. He remembered well the incidents of the afternoon, and his blood boiled at the indignity to which he had seen his dear mother subjected, and the outrage upon his sister, witnessed from his place of hiding. But then, who could describe his amazement at what followed? His sister—his beloved companion, the sharer of all his sympathies and antipathies, his Wanda—holding the

intercourse of a lover with one of these very scoundrels who had just insulted her. Who could the man be? This brought to his mind what followed the scene in the salon, where he had heard the Russian make rendezvous with Wanda at the Long Moss Spring; how, boiling with rage, he determined to prevent the meeting and challenge the man who had put this insult on his house; how, reaching the place of appointment, whilst waiting for his enemy, he had heard voices approaching at the moment the Russian appeared out of the obscurity of the wood; that believing the man escorted, or forming one of a party, and therefore beyond the reach of challenge, he determined all the same the wretch should not escape. He remembered firing, but instead of the report of his gun he heard a shriek—a woman's voice—a shriek of agony which seemed still ringing in his ears. Had his aim missed? Had he shot another, and what other? Then all became confusion, and he almost swooned with pain—mental and physical.

On and on the bearers marched, their steps beating time to the terrible thoughts and confused memories of the poor fevered brain. On over rough and uncertain paths, up and down over hard unevenness or soft-yielding footing, the dim trembling light of the candle almost swallowed up by impenetrable darkness.

Then, when the wounded man began to groan with the suffering of his cramped position and hard bed, they stopped, and with a sigh of relief the bearers set down the litter, and one spoke :

‘Do you see anything?’

His voice sounded hollow. And then there was a signal blown. The sound returned from above, below,

around—it floated away, was caught and brought back—and then Casimir knew they were in the caves.

He raised his poor dazed head and looked around. There, beside his litter, trembling in the dim light which shone only a short distance, quivering, rippling at his very hand, was cool dark water.

The man who held the candle stood alone; the others had thrown themselves down beside their charge, breathing wearily — almost panting. They sat in silence. Then, as one was about to rise, ‘Hush-sh!’ came from him who held the candle; and as they listened, they heard the dip of a paddle. Nearer and nearer it came; then into the light and up to the shore glided a canoe.

The bow only was visible at first, but the candle-bearer, holding the lantern high above his head, threw the light on a figure in the stern—a woman, who rose up and made her way through the toppling boat to the bow, when catching up the rope, she sprang ashore, and the candle-light fell upon a dark and beautiful face.

‘Have you waited long?’ she asked. ‘I was alone in camp when the poor boy came with your message. He had run the whole way. “Take the boat over, and stop when you see the light,” he said. “Some one is wounded, and they are bringing him here.” Then Affra came in, and I sped away. What is the matter?’

She stooped, and herself taking the candle from the man’s hand, peered into the face beside her.

‘Count Casimir!’ she exclaimed. ‘Oh, what is it?’

She dropped on her knees, took his hand, and speaking rapidly the while, examined his face and hands.

‘Quick!’ she said authoritatively; ‘give me water.’

The man took from his belt a cup, stooped, and

dipped water from the dark cool mirror at their feet. Quickly she sprinkled his face, and then as he opened his eyes and gave signs of returning consciousness, she ordered the litter to be taken to the boat. But this was impossible; the boat was too narrow, and a rude bed was hastily made of fagots and with the outer garments of the men. On this the young Casimir was laid, his head resting on the lap of the woman who had seated herself in the bow.

One of the men then pushed off the boat, sprang into the stern, and paddled out into darkness.

Those left with the light turned away, and keeping close to the shore, crossed the water by a kind of natural bridge difficult of ascent and descent; and as they paused midway, the canoe glided under and disappeared.

What a curious scene was that into which a little later Casimir was introduced—a smaller cave seemingly existing in a greater one; a chamber in a palace; a chapel in a cathedral.

By high-arched doors a room about thirty feet square was reached, a room with domed roof, studded with glittering stalactites formed centuries ago when the world was younger, by the drippings of water above, where now forest-trees grow on sandy soil, which is perpetually dry in the old river-bed; where in long-ago days stalagmites grew out of green mould and damp sliminess, soft moss now forms a background for the glittering spikes, and long fibrous fronds hang down and wave to and fro with the slightest movement below.

In corners of this rocky temple, where down deep fissures the light of day finds its way, tall graceful ferns spring up, and the sides of the walls are covered with half-

dried leaves and fresh young shoots, and old and young wall-plants ; and then in an upper corner a creeping vine has forced its way, forming a link with the upper and outer world.

Opposite the entrance to this curious apartment a great fire burns, and between the door and it a rude bed is being hastily arranged—dried leaves and hay and moss, and the shred of a blanket and a pillow of some soft dried grass ; and upon this our friend is lain, taken from the boat, which is drawn into the cave by six strong hands.

The fire blazes up, and throws its strong light on a picturesque group : an old woman in a dress made of blanket, which was once embroidered, but is now nearly of one colour with age and usage, stoops over the young Casimir, bathing and bandaging, whilst the girl we have seen before—she who was the messenger of danger to the Château in the afternoon, with her snowy neckcloth or chemisette and sleeves of cambric, and her elegant though faded costume—stands attending and assisting. Through the open door of the chamber the other members of this strange family can be seen moving to and fro, and from a most savoury smell, wafted in now and then, a meal is evidently in course of preparation. The patient, bound, bandaged, and fed, is left to his meditations or to

The old woman, whose opinion is waited for outside, pronounces favourably, and then the whole party gather around and sup generously from the savoury pot that has been simmering and seething for hours on the fire near by.

When the repast was finished, the old woman issued orders for the night.

'Thou, Zillah, and thou, Zebel, will stay with the young master and watch. Give him drink when he wakes, and call me should he wander in his head. I think he will sleep, but he has had a great shock. Thou, Miacha, and thy sister will come with me to the open. Let us enjoy the few nights that yet remain to us. I stifle here.'

She rose as she spoke, and all rose up with her. The two men answered that they would willingly keep the watch, and the others, after looking cautiously upon the sleeper, left the shore of the silent-river where they had been sitting, and walked away slowly into what seemed to be the interior of the cave.

From this, by a tortuous stairway formed by crushed rocks, which by some giant hand had been hurled and broken against one another, the party emerged in about a quarter of an hour from their departure.

As they appeared above the surrounding crags, they were dimly enveloped in a thin blue vapour, and looked like the inhabitants of a lower world coming forth with their native element around them.

The blue smoke curled in little puffs from many a crevice and corner, and hung high up over the great cairn in a thin cloud and tainted the clear air with a smell of burning timber.

This smoke came from the fires which warmed the sleeping room of the White Cave, and that also which had recently cooked the supper of old Affra and her children. It served the gipsies well, this smoke, for it kept their retreat free from intrusion. Neither peasant nor shepherd would come within miles of the mouth of hell, as they called it, and many a refugee from the

neighbouring towns and from more distant regions had found shelter and good entertainment under its protection.

The half-wild Bohemians who had now possession of the caves below were not its only tenants. Other tribes of these nomads occupied the situation from time to time as they completed the circle of their wanderings, or as necessity sent them in search of a hiding-place made secure by the superstition of the neighbourhood.

The story of the smoking rocks had reached wiser heads, and some years before this date a party of learned men and students made a voyage of discovery from Vienna and Lemberg to investigate the mystery; but they only found extinguished fires, used the year before by the gipsies, the ashes of which, bleached white, still remained in the crevices where they had burned to cook the food of the encampment, evidences of which were always visible.

As the wise men found no smoke, nor any sign of crater or volcanic action, they returned and reported the story, a canard, grown probably out of the smoke from the gipsies' fires. But the exposure of a mysterious neighbourhood only added to the security of the place. No other scientists would trouble it, and the natives would never hear the report. So Casimir slept safely down below, whilst the chieftainess of the tribe gathered her children together under the scantily-covered tents, and the whole encampment was soon in profound silence.

The morning came with an unexpected visitor.

During the night clouds had sailed up in the clear heavens, had gathered, and, long before the moon went

down, had overspread the whole sky. When Affra opened her eyes in the morning at early dawn, she became aware of a great change in the temperature around her, and, looking out of her tent, she saw fleecy flakes of snow sailing silently down through the scarcely bare branches of the trees which surrounded and shut in the enclosure. The ground was already white, and the air was piercingly cold. Winter had set in.

The old woman arose, and, with cold fingers, made the little change the gipsy thinks necessary between her sleeping and waking hours; and then sounds of returning life became evident in the encampment, and a little later a message came up from below.

The young Count had had a very restless night, and Affra must go to him at once.

She found him propped up by hay bundles, very weak and anxious.

'Affra,' he said, 'I must hear from the Château at once. My terribly rash act of yesterday may involve them all in ruin. Do you know, Affra, I shot a Russian; I believe I did. I fired, and I saw the man fall, and my mother and sister are alone, unprotected—worse than alone. Do you know, Affra'—here the boy took the withered hand in his and looked about cautiously, and dropped his voice—'do you know who is at the Château?'

'Yes, my son. I know your father left us only ten suns since for Radna. I was afraid of the step. I counselled against it, but he would listen to nothing. Poor man! after thirteen years of banishment, it is not wonderful he would see his home.'

'Left you, Affra? My father? Was he here?'

'Yes, my son. Now I will prepare thee food, and if

thou wilt keep quiet I will tell thee all. Here, Tragos, thou nimblefoot, go above and bring me milk.'

'It is here, mother.'

The young man, who had been one of Casimir's attendant's during the night, brought the milk in, and bread, and of this the guest made as hearty a meal as his appetite permitted. The fire was replenished. Affra sat down beside her patient, whose bed and pillow of hay she had arranged, and, as she ate from a black loaf and drank some dark liquid from a bottle, she told him all the scraps of news gathered during her summer wanderings.

But when the men outside had lighted their fires, and gone, as it afterwards turned out, to bring the old people and the children down from the snow above, then Casimir again begged Affra to tell him of his father.

'How didst thou know,' the old woman asked, 'that thy father was at the Castle?' 'Thou and thy sister were not to know.'

'I knew it by accident.'

'And hast thou seen thy father?'

'Yes; I saw him yesterday. But was he here, Affra?'

'Listen, my son. Thy father escaped from bondage, and, after months of wandering, we found him in a Carpathian forest in Hungary. There he was safe; but he did not know where he was, and, when we found him, he was ill, nigh unto death. We took him to our tents—for I recognised him instantly—and when he found this our destination, and Radna known to us, he begged us to let him join us, and to bring him home to die. There was little hope of getting him there then; he was very ill. But we took him as one of ourselves, tended him

skilfully, and the care, the change, the health-giving air from the woods, and above all, the hope of seeing his home, brought him round, and when we reached this cave, and his poor nerves got the rest this air always brings the weary, he became strong again, and I took him to Radna only a few days ago looking well.'

'Affra,' the boy said, as the old woman finished her tale, 'how can my family ever repay you and your tribe for all you have done for us? If we were rich, we could never repay you; and we are poor—you do not dream how poor.'

'My son, nothing thee and thine could give the gipsy, wert thou rich as the Czar, could benefit me and my people more than that thou and thy family have ever given us—freedom to come and go as we will, the liberty of these forests, and, what has made us more than ever thy friends, the protection of our young people. It is to thy beautiful sister my Miacha owes her life; for she was dying when we, after a forced march of many suns, got her to this cave; and the storms came on and cut off our food, and nothing one so ill could eat was left. Then it was that thou and the Countess Wanda found us, and thy sister sent my gipsy daughter delicate food and soft raiment, and came herself and made the child's life bright and happy.'

'Affra,' said Casimir, who was soothed and quieted by the old woman's soft voice, and interested by the curious old-world words she used, 'where do you come from? Were you always a gipsy?'

'Yes, my son, and all my race. I came from Spain. My tribe is Moorish. We belong to the plains more than to the woods and mountains; but we were driven

out, as it was prophesied we should be, and we took to the woods. It matters not where we are; we are fulfilling our destiny. I and my daughters are the last of our tribe. I shall soon be gathered to my fathers. Our race is run.'

'But Zillah?'

'Is not my son. Zillah is not even of my tribe; but all belonging to him were slain in a bloody war, when an encampment of our people were mistaken for the enemy, and the child was found alive in his dead mother's arms. They opened fire upon these poor, harmless creatures, and not a soul save this infant was left. I and my people were following the army; the child was given to me. I made him my son. He will be Miacha's husband. Now, my master, sleep. I will shut thee off from the noise the children will make, and thou shalt be well to-morrow.'

The young man closed his eyes as the old Affra rose up, and, replenishing the fire and moving some bundles of fagots between his bed and the door, she piled them high, and left the place. When she reached the outer cave, she found her people gathering at a distance. A fire had been kindled in quite another part, and around this the dusky figures were arranging all that to them represented home and fortune.

The air of the cave was peculiarly dry and mild, and the stream which passed through it seemed to counteract by its freshness the salt in the atmosphere.

The cave was ventilated by many holes and fissures, and the smoke from fires quickly vanished away.

As the old woman made her way to the distant group, Miacha and her young sister came to meet her.

‘It is such a snowstorm above, mother. I was glad to find thee gone. Is the young man better?’

‘Aye, better and asleep. Has anyone brought me news? There will be trouble now; he has killed a Russian soldier. Where is Zillah?’

‘Here, mother,’ said the stalwart Zingari, coming out of the darkness into the firelight.

‘Strike the tents, Zillah, and get them all down here. Close this entrance, and make out the other. It is very far away, but we cannot risk this one.’

‘It is near almost as this now, mother, with the boat, and much safer.’

‘Right. Then, when every vestige of the encampment is moved, go thou to Radna. Go first to the village and bring what thou canst of bread and meal, and then to the Castle. See the Countess, and tell her her son is well; do not say he has been hurt. Bring me news; and warn her that Radna will be more unsafe than ever. Here is money. Go!’

‘It is far around from the other entrance to Radna, mother; and there will be a short day now. I shall be late.’

‘Make thy road short as thou wilt now, my son, and upon thy return also. If the snow falls it will soon cover thy footprints. Give Zebel orders to see all the women and children brought down immediately. Go!’

Zillah turned away with Miacha, and hand in hand they disappeared in the darkness of the cave.

It was late when the last bundle and bag were brought down from above; but long before the party below had settled down for the day, every vestige of their late bivouac had disappeared under the soft white covering of

the rapidly falling snow. Casimir had slept long, had shown his return to a healthier condition by eating ravenously of a savoury stew, and was now, at sunset above, and what corresponded to it below, waiting impatiently for Zillah's return.

Bruised and sore, he moved with great pain from his couch, and joined the various groups which now occupied the cave; Miacha or her young sister, or Affra herself, going from time to time to the aperture to listen for the returning messenger, neither sound nor sign of whom was to be seen or heard.

At last scouts were despatched from either entrance to the cave, and Casimir was persuaded to retire to his mossy bed until their return.

Long past midnight, when all but the watchers were buried in sleep, far up the little dark stream the dip of a paddle was heard. At least they would have news; someone of the party waited for was coming back.

Nearer the sounds came and nearer, making for the light on shore. Now the little vessel glides up into the tiny harbour. Casimir, leaning upon the strong arm of a great Zingari, utters an exclamation as the torchlight falls on the crew of three, and in one of them he recognises his father.

Affra goes forward and helps out of the canoe a man, emaciated, pale, and tottering with weakness; and as Casimir goes forward, also feebly, the likeness is very strong between father and son.

'There is danger for thee abroad, my son,' Affra said to the Count. 'It is well thou hast returned; better thou hadst not gone.'

'Yes, better. I was headstrong, unwise, and now my

poor dear ones are worse off much, because of my escape, and the knowledge possessed that I had found my way home, alone, unprotected, undefended, and I again forced to fly, or let them see me overpowered and taken. No; not taken! Never again shall I alive be led back to bondage. Better fly to the presence of my Maker, and crave mercy and pardon for the deed. But, my son, you are ill! Affra! Zillah! what is this?"

Casimir, whose limited strength had been greatly overdrawn, had gone to his father's side, and as the Count spoke he grasped his son's arm. All bruised and sensitive, the pain was agonizing, and the boy dropped as if stricken down.

In a few words Affra explained.

'But Zillah said that Casimir was unhurt, and could return to the Castle to watch over his mother and sister. Oh, this is too terrible!'

'Had I said otherwise,' Zillah answered, 'thou, Excellency, wouldst not have returned with me, and ere this thou wouldst have been in their hands. They were in the Castle then; it swarmed with them.'

'And the boy is safe,' Affra said, as she stooped over him. 'Neither he nor thou could do more than add to his mother's anxiety. No harm can come to those thou didst leave behind. See, Casimir comes back! Here, Zillah, help him up. He is bruised, but there is no serious injury.'

They lifted him and led him to his bed. Another was prepared for the Count, and then father and son were left together. The fires which had been lighted by the various groups who had established themselves in the caves were now burning low. Many had burnt out, but

a tongue of flame occasionally shot up, sending a flash of light across the dark, still water, bringing out for an instant the weird entablature of the vaulted roof, then sinking down to a lurid mass which in time paled and died out. When all other sounds had ceased, the winds stole down and whispered in the caves—whispered at first, till, gaining courage from the silence, they sang all the long night a plaintive lullaby. The stream moved noiselessly, silently on, 'and eddies curled their glassy rings beneath like the still unbroken beating of a sleeper's pulse.'

CHAPTER VII.

'FOR GOD'S SAKE, KEEP AWAKE. LET US SAY OUR PRAYERS.'

THE snow fell steadily for a week after the Count Stetzki had taken refuge in the caves. Little intercourse could be held with the Castle, and father and son were well-nigh worn out with anxiety for the fate of their loved ones.

All they heard confirmed their worst fears. Zillah had been able to gather a few vague scraps of information from the village, but visits to the outer world now were becoming exceedingly dangerous. The snow might cease falling at any moment, and if it did during the absence of any of the inmates of the cave, they would be obliged to remain away or run the risk of leaving tracks that would lead their enemies upon them.

Early in the week Zillah had learnt from a peasant that the Castle was occupied by soldiers, that Countess Wanda had been brought home upon the night of the Count's escape seriously ill; that she had been found insensible at the Long Moss Spring, only a few yards distant from the body of a Russian official Count Casimir was accused of having murdered; that Countess Wanda was still ill, and that the soldiers at the Castle were commanded by one of the officers quartered at Britzka.

This information drew from Casimir the confession of his rash act, and plunged his father into still deeper grief and anxiety. Here was a crime for which there was no pardon to be expected. If Casimir were captured he would meet a felon's death—nothing could save him.

Before this new terror all else vanished from the mind of the father; his own danger was as nothing. That which had filled his soul with loathing, dread of recapture, and return to exile and suffering, would have been welcome now as the price of his son's safety. He could see no chance of escape for the boy, and he knew what his brave ones at home were enduring at the thought of this new danger.

And then another anxiety came before his troubled vision, only less than this terrible weight; what Casimir had told him of his young and beautiful sister, of this almost unknown sweet child, whom he had only once been permitted to look upon from a distance since her babyhood. This perplexed and alarmed him. Who was this with whom his child held intercourse? Whom had she gone to meet at a rendezvous made in the hearing of her brother? Who was it that had paid the penalty of this clandestine meeting?

Casimir could throw no light on the subject. All he knew was what he had witnessed from his hiding-place. A man, in the hated livery of a hated country, had addressed words of love to his sister, and she had recognised and responded, though her terror at the situation had almost overcome her strength. Casimir saw the meeting, he heard the man call her familiarly by her name, and he heard him appoint the rendezvous. Then

he could hear no more. And this could be interpreted but in one way. The child, for so her father looked upon her, had a lover, and this lover was a Russian, one of the very creatures sent to spy upon her family and persecute them.

'Well, he had met just punishment,' the Count thought, and this brought him back to Casimir and Casimir's danger.

Affra had but one plan of escape to suggest, and escape from the neighbourhood and concealment of the boy became more and more the object of all within the cave, as more and more clearly the situation in which they were placed became evident.

There was only one road open, Affra thought; one means of concealing the fugitive, and of getting him out of the country. He must be passed on from one gipsy family to another. He must adopt their life, and as far as possible their habits and manners; and by the signs and instructions she could give him, he could make himself known to any wandering tribe he encountered, and claim their recognition and protection. But until he was far from the scene of his late most unlucky adventure, and away from any who might recognise him, he must submit to be concealed by whatever means could be devised as the emergency demanded: and this would be a restriction, Affra knew by experience, very hard to impose on the youth.

Casimir, of course, promised obedience to his father's wishes and Affra's plans; but it was more to satisfy their anxiety than his own fears; for, in reality, the boy could not be brought to see the serious consequences of his rash act, or the danger of his position. Still he

would do as his father wished. It would be hard to be sent far from his beloved home ; but if this must be, the wild life of the Zingari camp and the excitement of escape offered the only alternative his mind could tolerate.

Affra's plan was to send Zillah and Zebel to make reconnoissance as soon as possible of the force and position of the enemy, to ascertain what watch was being kept, and what was thought concerning the mysterious disappearance of father and son ; for it was well known that the party who had gone to search the Castle upon that fatal day was in pursuit of Count Stetzki.

Then, having gathered all the information possible concerning the captives, the young men were to hasten to the different rendezvous of the gipsies and make arrangements for the reception and concealment of Count Casimir. These arrangements must be made according to the discretion of the envoys, for none at the cave knew the circumstances under which the other gipsies might be found. And perhaps these people had already awakened suspicion and were under surveillance.

But some risk must be run, and that which Affra feared most was the danger of leaving the cave. If the men were seen or tracked, all was lost ; and it was with many instructions and precautions that the old queen of the tribe dismissed her two trusty sons on this delicate and dangerous mission.

Zillah and Zebel were not averse to the change ; anything like restraint was to them harder than the veriest hardship to bear, and they started off with the joy of unchained dogs, and shook themselves free from the dark-

ness and dreariness of their subterranean abode with the delight of uncaged animals, though when they reached the cave's mouth, they shrunk back in momentary dismay, for it was piercingly cold, and the glare on the snow which had now ceased to fall was blinding.

They had left an atmosphere of summer warmth and twilight darkness. They found themselves in arctic frost and dazzling light. The young men drew back into the cave and waited a few moments before making another attempt, and when they did, it was some time before they could see anything but the heavily-laden trees which surrounded the enclosure.

At last they cautiously tried the snow with a stick. It was yet quite soft—any footprint would betray them. How were they to avoid leaving such witnesses?

Long they planned and pondered, and were about to return and wait till the snow had formed a hard crust, when Zillah descried the limb of a tree growing near, bent down by the heavy weight of snow, and within reach of their arms. This, when at its natural height, would be some twenty feet from the ground, and, relieved of its burden, it would, they knew, spring back and land them, if they could cling to it, far up above the cave's mouth. An uncovered bit of rock near gave them safe footing, and from this Zillah cautiously passed the boat's cord, which they had gone back and secured, and fastening it together at the bottom, the young men swung themselves by it safely upon the great heavily-laden branch. With the first movement and vibration, the snow fell off, as they knew it would, and the limb flew back to its natural position.

They pulled up their rope and began a difficult journey

from limb to limb, shaking off tons of snow as they moved, till, at the end of half an hour they had reached the other side of the tree and had let themselves down from its furthestmost branch upon a slanting rock, from which the snow slid when it fell, and which was quite bare.

Here they paused, and looked back. Not a mark or footprint or evidence of the presence of man or beast was to be seen. The white, soft, feathery snow lay on the cave and around it, untouched save by that which had fallen from the tree, and this did not reach the mouth of the cave.

They were safe so far, and only a few feet below them lay the river, the margin of which they knew would give them safe and trackless footing. To reach this only a few yards intervened, and Zillah soon discovered a means of doing it in safety. A branch of the tree was broken off over their head, and this they carefully and forcibly embedded in the snow after they had passed and obliterated their footprints. They reached the river and were safe.

And now three days had elapsed and they returned not. The weather outside continued so cold that the temperature of the cave became chilly, and it was deemed prudent to do without fire by day, lest the smoke might betray the captives; food, too, was getting scarce. The supplies upon which Affra and her family depended from the sorties made by her children were not now obtainable, and this increased the anxiety of those shut up in a cave which might become a tomb.

The situation had become almost unbearable when, upon the fourth night after the departure of the young

men, Casimir and his father sat over some smouldering embers in the curious chamber now given up to the gipsies' guests.

By some means, known only to herself, Affra kept the time, and said it was about nine o'clock when she came, and, bringing the two a part of the best left in her scantily-furnished larder, sat down to keep them company.

'Affra,' the Count said, 'I can bear this suspense no longer. Come what may, I shall leave this to-morrow. I will go to Radna and give myself at least the satisfaction of knowing that my dear ones live. If I fall into the hands of my enemies, God help me! But nothing can be worse than this agonizing uncertainty.'

'We shall see when to-morrow comes,' the old woman answered. 'No harm has come to Zillah; he will return. Wait for that.'

'But, Affra,' Casimir said, 'Zillah has been gone four days. If no harm has come to him, why is this?'

'Most probably he is watched,' Affra replied, 'and dare not return to the caves. Zillah is wise and prudent; there is good reason for his delay, but no harm has come to him. Keep thou and thy father quiet here; I will tell Miacha to keep silence amongst the women and children, and I will go up to the entrance and listen. I may hear Zillah's signal.'

'Let me go with thee, Affra,' Casimir said.

'No; I will go in the boat, and alone.'

'Alone?'

'Yes, it is best.'

And the old woman left the two captives, and

walked away towards the distant glimmer of the camp fire.

A few moments afterward, a shadowy figure propelled a shadowy boat over the dark water. The dip of the pole, and the slight splash of the bow as it moved the smooth water aside, were scarcely heard in the boat itself, and all was silent on the shore of the weird stream:

During the day the cave had been unusually dark. The snow had covered every hole and fissure from which those down below usually gathered a few rays of light, and nothing now remained in communication with the upper world but the smoke from their scantily supplied fire. This rose immediately from its rude hearth and found its way out somehow. But want of light and ventilation began to be terribly oppressive, and Count Stetzki and his son had adopted the habit of clambering up as near as possible to the aperture, now closed by a wedged rock, which had served the gipsies as a doorway to the camp above. Here they could get a little air, and here they repaired to wait Affra's return.

They had not long to wait. Scarcely had they reached the highest step of the difficult ascent when, through the darkness, far in the distance they could discern the feeble, trembling light of her lantern. She had left the boat there, and was returning over the difficult way on foot.

Up and down the watchers followed the light rising and falling as the bearer, with apparent difficulty, made her way over the uneven road towards them. The refugees descended, and met the old woman near the door of their own chamber. She was weary, and sat

down on a pile of fagots, panting after her long and toilsome journey.

'I left the boat,' she said, 'where the boys would find it. I cannot but think they will come to-night.'

'You saw nothing?'

'I saw nothing, but I heard something. I know not if it were Zillah's voice, for I heard the sound only once; but there *was* a voice far down the river. I waited and listened; it came not again, and I dared not leave the cave.'

'What is the night?'

'Bitterly cold, but clear. The snow will be now frozen, and we might move on any day.'

'It is early for such cold,' Count Stetzki said.

'Yes,' Affra replied. 'Only once within my memory winter came thus early, and that was when thou, young master, wert born.'

'Surely,' Count Stetzki said, 'this very month!'

'Now, listen, my masters,' Affra said. 'To-morrow, whether or no Zillah and Zebel return, we will go forward—men and women and children. We will leave thee here, with what food we have, and with fire; and watch our chance of returning to thee with aid and supplies, and that as necessary to thy happiness, news from the Castle. Be assured Affra will not forsake thee; but there is great danger for thee with this family about, and there is danger abroad, or Zillah would have returned. Go to thy bed now, and wait what the morrow brings forth.'

Scarcely had the last word left her lips when she sank on her knees and put her ear to the ground.

'They are coming!' she said. 'Hush-sh!'

The fires, which had been allowed to burn up earlier in the evening, had now dwindled down to smouldering embers, and gave little light beyond the spot where they burned. At the moment the old woman had heard the sound, inaudible to all others, Miacha joined the group, stepping down from where she and her sister slept, with a brand to light her footsteps.

‘Throw fagots on the fire and light thy Zillah, child,’ the old woman said. ‘He is coming, and with unsteady hand on the oar. I thought not this of Zillah. That tells the story of his delay.’

‘Mother, thou art wrong,’ Miacha said. ‘Zillah promised me he would not go near the village, and where else would he get drink?’

As she spoke the girl threw dry fagots on the bed of red coals and blew a flame, which soon shot up, illuminating all around it. By this light the waters were seen slightly agitated, and they felt rather than saw the boat in the enshadowed distance.

The party stepped down to the water’s edge to meet the returning messengers. Miacha stood on a projecting rock over the polished surface, now quivering in the red light, her figure a silhouette, with a flame-coloured background.

On the crags above and behind the gipsy family were bivouacked; the red light reached them in fitful flashes, and as the men and women moved about preparatory to retiring for the night, the numbers by their shadows were doubled, and the place seemed teeming with human beings. Still the boat did not come in sight, and Affra’s face wore a frown of displeasure as she said:

'They do not seem to know what they are about. They are making for the landing lower down.'

As she spoke the boat shot like an arrow into the light, and before the party on the shore had time for more than an exclamation, it was at their feet, and three armed men sprang out.

As quick as lightning Affra took in the situation, and rose to it. She had a weapon at hand, of which her enemies seemed ignorant, and before the men had fairly recovered their footing on the slippery shore, they stood powerless in utter darkness.

'We are lost,' said one.

'Hush-sh!' was the answer, 'thou art making thyself a target. Keep perfectly quiet.'

'Quiet, man! I dare not step or stir for fear of falling into some hell-pit. I feel things moving about me, my hair stands on end with terror. Holy Virgin, save us!'

'Hark!' said another voice in a whisper; 'I hear retreating footsteps.'

'Those we came for will walk quietly away, and leave us here to rot.'

'Ho! Hollo!'

'Echo.'

'What use in calling? we are entrapped, entirely at their mercy. I believe we are in the regions of the damned. God save us!'

'I saw thousands of figures like human beings crawling in and out of holes and crannies above our heads. I swear I did, just as the light went out. And I saw people here standing where we stand now, and as the light flashed out I saw them vanish. I tell thee, we are lost!'

‘But keep thou quiet, Michael Storoff, I tell thee. I believe I saw a glimmer of light, and now it is lost. Let us sit down, lest we fall or stagger into some yawning pit.’

Affra, standing beside the fire she had extinguished and covered with a wet blanket, heard this conversation, and felt that the would-be captors were harmless; but that which made them so, made it also impossible to aid her friends, or to communicate with her people, and explain to them the cause of the sudden darkness and necessity for silence.

She knew the three men could be easily managed, for they were well nigh overpowered with fright; but Zillah and Zebel, her two strongest sons, were not here, and who was there to cope with three armed Russians? As she pondered, standing over the quite extinguished fire, a new terror seized her. These men belonged to a party. Were the others watching the cave’s mouth waiting for the report of those sent on to explore? In that case they might be surprised any moment. Something must be done. She made a sound scarcely louder than that of a cricket. It was answered, and in a moment her hand was grasped.

‘Zillah!’ she said, feeling his face.

‘Mother!’ he whispered; and they moved away.

‘I tell thee again,’ whispered one of the newcomers, ‘I hear noises, and things are moving all around us. Let us fire at random.’

‘And bring the fiends about us? No, I am not anxious for their company before my time. Keep still; the air is soft and warm. I am sitting comfortably. We must wait. I feel overcome with sleep; there is something in the air that fairly weighs down my eyelids.’

'For God's sake, keep awake!'

'Let us say our prayers!'

'I cannot, Michael Storoff. Do thou pray. Oh! do not fall asleep. If we do that we wake in eternity, and yet I scarce can keep my eyelids open.'

During this whispered conference, old Affra, holding Zillah's hand, stepped behind some stone projections, where their voices would not reach the strangers.

'How didst thou come?' Affra asked.

'I made my way in the dark till I came in sight of thy fire. All day I have been watching these men; they hung about the cave since early morning. Zebel has gone to Radna. All is arranged for Count Casimir's escape if we can get him from the cave. I came up just as the men sprang from the boat.'

'What's to be done?'

'This. They are overcome with terror, and dare not stir. You must find Count Stetzki and Count Casimir. They are just in front of the men—between them the river. I will go back with thee and try to find them, but they know not our signals. These men must be overpowered and bound, but they are armed. It is dangerous work. How didst thou quench the fire all in an instant, mother?'

'I had a tub and a wet blanket ready since yesterday. I feared some evil when thou didst not return.'

Then, mother, see here. Give me this wet blanket; I know where the men are. I saw them at the instant the fire was quenched. Do thou stand ready to throw a light on the spot. I will find our masters, and thou mayst leave the rest to me.'

They groped their way back, and the blanket was lifted cautiously off the extinguished fire.

‘I saw a light,’ one of the strangers whispered.

‘So did I,’ another replied; ‘like a spark of fire.’

‘I am sure I hear the wings of bats or birds. Hark!’

Affra had lighted her lantern, and covered it with her garment, but she could throw a jet of light at her feet, she knew, with safety, and by this means she found her way to the people above. Here she gave certain instructions, and accompanied by the ~~two~~ men, who, with Zillah and the absent Zebel, formed the force of her army, descended cautiously and joined Zillah, whom she found where she had left him.

‘All is ready,’ she whispered. ‘We must lose no time. They will begin to think and plan if we leave them alone longer. The people above will make a noise, and under cover of it thou must do thy work.’

As the old woman spoke, she swung the lantern around her head, and a curious distant murmur came down from the people above. This gradually increased in sound to a roar, out of which here and there shrieks shrill and long darted.

The air bore billows of this terrible sound, which the caves echoed back and doubled, and amidst the terror and confusion a scuffle was heard, voices cried out for mercy. Then all was still. For a moment the old Affra listened.

‘A light!’

It was Zillah’s voice. She descended with the lantern. There lay the enemy, overpowered more by their terror than by the hands that had seized and bound them in the dark.

'Spare our lives! Holy Virgin, save us!'

The old woman examined the three strong men lying helpless and with bandaged eyes under the heavy hands of their captors. She saw them securely bound; then ordering them to be put in as comfortable a position as the place would admit, covered their bodies and left them. It was now past midnight, and before dawn the whole family of the Zingari and their refugee guests were on the march.

It was so cold that the children had to be carried. The deep snow in the wood had scarcely formed a crust strong enough to support a heavy weight, so their progress was slow, and it was nightfall before they reached the main road, only a few miles from the caves. Accustomed as they were to every hardship, the terrible excitement of the night, the poor and hastily partaken food, and the sudden transition from a warm temperature to this bitter cold, began to tell on the party, and they determined at all hazards to seek the shelter of a hamlet some leagues before them.

Casimir had long ago left them. Following Zillah's instructions, he had ere this reached the first stage of his journey; and Count Stetzki fell in with the party, and tramped wearily by their side.

Affra saw from hour to hour that his step became more and more uncertain, and her apprehensions grew stronger with the waning day that his strength would break completely down.

The road, too, was harassing. A sledge or two had passed over it since the snowfall, and in the smooth, deep groove made by the runners the party were obliged to walk, for all between lay deep and cold under a thin

crust. The short twilight was deepening into night; they were still an hour from shelter and possible rest.

Affa was looking about for a suitable place to bivouac, for she despaired of getting on, when her quick ear caught a sound of horses' hoofs, and she fell behind the others and listened.

Yes, surely there was the heavy thud of a galloping horse coming up behind.

At a signal the party halted, and in a twinkling they had deposited Count Stetzki in the midst of bundles and blankets, and pots and pans, and what answered to these poor nomads for tent-cloths. The women and children clustered around, and not a vestige of their *protégé* was visible, as a horseman rode in sight and hailed them.

BOOK II.

CHAPTER I.

PETERSBURG OUT OF SEASON.

'Three score and ten I can remember well,
Within the volume of which time I have seen
Hours dreadful and things strange, but this sore night
Hath trifled former knowings.'

Macbeth.

OF all cities in the world Petersburg is probably the most dismal during the months when autumn rapidly changes to winter, and the cold wind struggles for supremacy against the hot sun.

Snow, which usually falls in the morning, melts at noon, freezes over in thin crust when the sun has set, and is broken through and trampled into slush as the evening wears on. House windows are sealed with heavy shutters, through which no ray of light can reach the dark street below, where the lamps burn dimly, are few and far between, and where the people to be met add to the sombreness of the scene by their dark muffings, their bent heads, and their silent hurried movements. Occasionally a rumbling vehicle passes, the wheels sinking into the slush and ice, the horses driven cautiously, for

under the damp covering the road is slippery and dangerous.

Heavy gray clouds, snow-laden, hide moon and stars; cold and damp above, cold and wet underfoot; the air chilling one like a cold draught—there is nothing but discomfort without.

In the homes of the poor, children huddle together around the scarcely lighted fires, whilst the elders bring in tired faces and weary limbs, wet feet and damp clothing, and the opening door admits a cold, raw air peculiar to early snow.

No smile greets parent or child; a look of anxious inquiry gives to the little faces of the children an old, careworn look. The parent has no words to describe his misery. He is stolid as the ox; he feels, but he can give no expression to his feelings. He accepts existence and his lot as if it were unalterable; he has no idea that he can control the circumstances of his life. Happiness, comfort, rest — these he thinks the prerogatives of another class, far away, high above him as the sun in the firmament. He works steadily from early morn to late evening for the crust of black bread he eats, the miserable shelter he calls home. He is spoken to and beaten by his superiors like a dog, and, like a dog, he caresses the hand that strikes him.

Far back as his memory can reach, it has always been the same—the unwritten traditions of the family, the reminiscences of the aged, all the same. Cold, hunger, work, blows, violence, cruelty—a sunless, smileless existence; and his children, is this same experience to be theirs?

Some faint sounds of freedom have reached his ears

and awakened a momentary interest ; but these murmurs have been drowned by cries of anguish from those who felt the lash in punishment of their dangerous doctrines. He is frightened into silence, this poor soul ; and he comes to realize that he has been created for the use and convenience of others.

Freedom ! Yes, he has heard about freedom, but the word has no meaning. His father was a serf, and lived under the shadow and protection of a great house. He is a freeman, struggling in a sea of ignorance and darkest superstition, unprotected, uncared for, belonging to no one, without a friend ; and this is to him all that he comprehends of freedom. He will listen to none who preach a doctrine of liberty ; it is a false doctrine, and leads to nothing but confusion.

And, to him, religion is nearly as bad and as unwholesome. His pape is a low peasant, cunning, avaricious, ignorant, teaching just what suits his purpose, dealing in charms and incantations, feeding the ignorant with idolatry that would shock a pagan. The poor peasant, thrown back upon his own untaught mind, thinks nothing — lives on like an ox ; dies like one.

Now from this picture of sadness and darkness, and the squalid shelter of the million, let us go to something brighter—to the luxurious homes of the few.

At this time of year Petersburg is preparing to receive back her pleasure-seekers, who have deserted her during the uninteresting season.

All day long now you may see windows being cleaned, carpets being shaken, fuel and provisions arriving, chimneys smoking where for many months birds have dwelt undisturbed. The silent streets begin to be alive with

domestics and tradespeople, and even the postmen and letter-carriers appear.

The season of the French and German watering-places is over; but Russian society is lingering still in other countries, or has taken itself to Paris, that Mecca of the fashionable, and will only return when the women have selected objects of envy, lovely gowns, and all the finery of the latest inventions, and when their husbands, fathers, and brothers have overdrawn the exchequer. Then the world of fashion will return to the world of famine, and Petersburg will be herself again.

Then winter will have set in, and the streets will wear a far different aspect. A white mantle will be spread on the earth, and all the abominations on its surface in the dismal slums will disappear under this clean covering. Heavy-wheeled vehicles will be replaced by noiselessly running sleighs; horses will dash on, stepping firmly down on a hard, firm footing, and their bells will enliven the city. By day open carriages, by night close sleigh boxes, convey the youth, the beauty, the rich, and the noble all in one direction—all tending pleasureward.

Nothing is thought of, nothing else is discussed, nothing else is worth living for, but pleasure and excitement; and if such a life has attendant evils, they must be well concealed if they follow or accompany the Russian aristocracy, Russian society; for there is not a more unconcerned and irresponsible, or a less anxious, people in the world.

Uneducated, luxurious, selfish, clever, brilliant, gay; firm friends, bitter, unforgiving enemies; beautiful women, handsome men; extravagant, often unscrupulous—such is the Russian aristocracy.

To this general character there are honourable exceptions. Good, honest, noble-hearted men, sincerely anxious for the welfare of the masses; tender, devoted women, spending their lives with their people, passing their time in good works. These are few in number. The list begins with the imperial family, and extends scarcely beyond the narrow circle which surrounds the throne.

Such examples, and the teachings of such people, are looked upon as most pernicious by those who govern the country. Freedom of speech, liberty of the press, universal education, are subjects discussed as possibilities of the future—discussed within this small circle, seldom elsewhere. Such dangerous doctrines are quickly suppressed once they leave the shelter of the royal roof; or if they find expression elsewhere, the voice which utters them is soon silenced.

Surveillance, espionage is ordered. The victim is discovered, and at once made to feel the sting of the petty official. If he be stubborn, severe measures are applied; and if he yield not to these they are doubled, till, maddened to desperation, the victim curses the King, whom he is carefully instructed to look to as the source of all his misery. Then he has spoken his sentence. Every word and action is duly chronicled, coloured, and placed before the Czar. His Majesty sees before his eyes damning evidence of treason, of enmity towards himself, his government, and his family, and that in a quarter where he believed he possessed a loyal subject, a true friend. Disheartened, disgusted, his Majesty, like another ruler of old, washes his hands of the case—leaves it to those who are supposed to administer justice, loses a valuable subject, and

consigns an innocent man to death, or worse. A trial takes place, the drama is played out in secrecy, and the victim, whose voice is unheard, who is allowed neither the help of friend nor independent counsel, is condemned.

All is done with terrible despatch—first the arrest, then the moment of suspense, then the doom.

Friends and relations are silent through fear, or leave the country that they may express their abhorrence of a Government and a ruler so cruel, so despotic, so unjust. Every word they utter is used to confirm the action of their oppressors. Decrees of banishment or exile are easily obtained, confiscation of their fortunes follows; the family are ruined, and are thereby powerless—the unrighteous prevail.

And the guilty ones, where are they? Those who have hounded on and maddened the victim to his destruction, these inciters to rebellion, where do they abide?

Look for them in the Bureau. They dwell in hives, and spin their network over Russian life, social and political. Their name is Legion.

Treason-felony, conspiracy, are taps under the thumb of the official. Dark streams, often blood-tinted, flow at his will, are stopped at his pleasure. Nihilism is his latest instrument, his last invention. Born of despotism and injustice, reared by cruelty, it is a likely agent of confusion. But, through the darkness and blindness of these poor tools, an engine of destruction has been produced which will, at no distant day, crush and destroy those very agencies by which it was created.

But now, when heavy snow-clouds hang over the capital, and the dismal evening has succeeded to the gray twilight, and the streets are nearly deserted, and the few

people abroad splash through a thin ice-coating into cold slush, now suddenly the stillness is broken by the sound of cavalry in rapid motion. Nearer and nearer they come. On through narrow streets unfrequented by military bodies, the horses' hoofs beating through snow and ice, and ringing upon the stone pavement underneath; and now they are in sight, and flash by. A carriage, drawn by two steaming horses, surrounded on all sides by armed and equipped Cossacks; a curious sight for the eyes of a civilized people.

In advance of the carriage the Circassians ride wildly forward, their tall bodies looking gigantic on the high cushions which cover the saddles; the enormous Astracan caps bent slightly forward; the tall spears held upright, and often clanging together at the top, many feet above the heads of their bearers; the *nagazka* crossed on the breast, the handle appearing over the right shoulder; the deadly rifle, sword, or cutlass swinging at their side. On they dash, swaying, clashing, clanging, riding at full speed before the foaming horses at their heels.

Behind, the escort is less picturesque, but scarcely less wild. They carry the long lance also, and wear the *nagazka*, but they are enveloped in a great over-garment, the hood of which is, in many cases, drawn over the low-crowned cap. Fierce and formidable they certainly look, but the reverse of *smart*; and yet this is a Royal Guard, escorting a King and Emperor. In this way, unheralded, rudely escorted through obscure streets and byways, the Czar of Poland, Emperor and Autocrat of All the Russias, makes his entrance into his capital.

What does he fear, that he comes thus?

He has been taught to fear his people—he, their friend, whose earliest thought was of their welfare, whose first act was to give them freedom. His subjects loved him, worshipped him. How has he forfeited their affection?

This is the answer.

We are poor, hungry, cold, ignorant, and ill. We are oppressed by hard masters, ground down by taxation, robbed of the results of our industry and self-denial, punished when we have no more to give, murdered or exiled if we complain. And our Emperor is all-powerful, a despot, an autocrat. These are his acts; we suffer from his hands. Our children shall not suffer what we suffer. We will sell our own wretched lives to save our children.

The tyrant must die!

Another tyrant will succeed this!

He also must die! Generations to come will call us blessed if we rid the world of a monster.

Who is to do it?

He who has least to live for. He who has most to avenge.

How is it possible to make them, the people, understand that it is a system they must destroy, not a man? How are they to comprehend the power above an autocratic King, and the extent of this power, unknown to civilized notions and people, unbelieving in by those who have never felt its irresistibility? How can it be explained to the million that their Emperor is powerless, even to the saving of a life, if that life be a necessary link in the chain which binds freedom, the web and woof whereof is officialism?

If the people of Russia could be made to comprehend the situation, if the Czar could be brought to let go the

feeble hold he has upon a despotic sceptre—if these two forces, the crown and the people, determined to meet, they would crush out the disease, kill the monster. Is our Emperor contemplating such a day of deliverance? There are strange rumours in the air, and this is one of them.

At the palace all is in readiness for the august master. The preparations have been conducted in secret and silence, and within closed gates. No announcement is made of the Emperor's approach. The palace is flooded with police, detectives and spies, watching one another, suspecting everyone. The danger seems inside, not outside; for no additional precaution is taken there, to correspond with the evidences of great anxiety here, where every attendant is either a police-spy in disguise, or a recognised official of that body.

The master of the machinery, he is here also. Duly installed in the palace, the spider has spun his web in the antechamber, where he awaits with watchful eye the flies which, all unwarily, approach his trap.

The palace is aglow with light and warmth. Servants and officials hurry hither and thither. His Majesty is preparing for dinner, which is being prepared for his Majesty under the skilful direction of the autocrat of the royal kitchen. It is now a quarter to nine. At nine precisely dinner is commanded. And now there is commotion in the antechamber, where an unexpected guest has arrived—a guest whose credentials cannot be neglected, and whose name has been immediately passed on from one to another, till at last the Chamberlain stands with the card and letter in his hand at the door of his Majesty's private apartment. But there he waits in vain and, after all, hears that his Majesty has departed by

another door, and has joined the dining party in the *salle à manger* beyond. Then the messenger retires, and descends the flight of steps and the corridor which leads to the antechamber. Here he finds the stranger fast asleep in one of the great chairs before the fire.

The Chamberlain pauses, then is about to awaken and inform the young man of the failure of his mission, when from behind a *portière* the figure of an old man appears. He holds up his finger to stay the action of the Chamberlain, then beckons him to the curtained door, through which they both disappear, and enter a small room, evidently an official chamber.

The old man is thin to emaciation; his head well covered with coarse gray hair, cut short and bristling up from a low, narrow brow; his face parchment-coloured and a mass of wrinkles. A heavy gray moustache covers thin compressed lips, small gray eyes twinkle under shaggy brows, and he moves with curious undulations and as noiselessly as a cat.

He speaks in soft, low tones, and as he does so an attempted smile makes the wrinkles deeper, and gives to the face an expression sinister and cruel.

‘Is he to have audience to-night?’ he asks, pointing over his shoulder towards the sleeper outside.

‘I could not give the message, Excellency,’ the Chamberlain replies. ‘His Majesty has given orders to admit nobody until after dinner. I waited at the door, hoping to see his Majesty coming out; but the party were assembled in the Winter Garden, and they went that way; so I came back for orders.’

‘Were you advised of his coming?’ the old man asked.

'Oh yes, your Excellency; and his Highness's apartment is in readiness; but he was not expected till the fifteenth. This is the fourteenth. However, I think the Princess expected him; for her Excellency has been very anxiously inquiring about the route by which he would travel.'

'Why was I not informed of this?'

'I thought your Excellency knew the Prince was expected. It was yesterday her Highness ordered his Highness's apartments to be prepared.'

'Here in the palace?'

'In the north wing, Excellency.'

'Good-night.'

'Good-night, Excellency.'

The Chamberlain retired to the anteroom, the spider to his cell, and the young man still slept, overcome with fatigue and cold. Yielding to the influence of the welcome warmth, and soothed by the sweet scent of the shrubs and plants which blossomed around him, he slept on, and it was with difficulty the Chamberlain aroused him.

'Well,' he said at last, turning and gazing up in the face bent over him, 'what is it?'

'His Majesty is dining, and will receive no one now,' the Chamberlain said.

'And Madame the Princess O——?' the young man inquired.

'Dines with his Majesty,' the Chamberlain answered.

'Have you any message for me?'

'Only, Excellency, that I was to conduct you to your apartments, and explain her Highness's engagements, should she be unable to receive you.'

The young man seemed scarcely awake. He got up listlessly and gazed around him, as if only beginning to realize where he was.

At this moment the curtains were again parted, and the old man with the curious undulating, sliding motion came forward.

'Ah, my dear Prince,' he purred, stretching out his hand, 'this is a joyful surprise! I thought you far away in Poland.'

'It is no less surprise to me,' the young man answered, extending his hand with evident reluctance.

'Ah! but you are expected by Madame the Princess?'

'It would seem not,' the stranger answered, shrugging his shoulders and looking around.

'And his Majesty?'

'I know nothing, Excellency, but that I was ordered home, that I am to report at headquarters on the fifteenth—which is to-morrow—and that my mother has commanded my presence here.'

'Ah, yes; and you are tired and sleepy. Forgive me for detaining you even this little moment. May I be allowed the happiness of accompanying you to your apartment?'

'My apartment? Do I remain in the palace?'

'Such are his Majesty's orders, Excellency,' the Chamberlain said; 'and the Princess has given instructions for your Excellency's comfort.'

As he spoke, he relieved the young man of the heavy fur coat he carried on his arm, and preceded the two gentlemen, who followed him through long, overheated halls and corridors, up a broad staircase, lighted bril-

liantly, and decorated, as were the deep windows at the top, by flowering shrubs, until at last they reached and entered a small but luxuriously furnished apartment, where a fire burned brightly on a tiled hearth.

Here an attendant was lighting candles, and everything seemed arranged and prepared for the comfort of the guest.

'Ah, nothing is left undone, you see. Ah, mon Dieu! what it is to have a mother! You will enjoy your rest, my dear Prince—rest and food, but food first. I have not yet dined: May I promise myself the great pleasure of your company when you have rested a little—say half an hour? Madame the Princess will probably be engaged till late, and will expect us all to see to your comfort.'

The old gentleman glided about the room from one thing to another, inspecting this, arranging that, purring like a cat, whilst the guest sat buried in a great arm-chair before the fire.

'I fear I must forego the pleasure of seeing you again to-night,' the new-comer replied. 'I have been ten hours in the saddle without rest, and am overcome with fatigue and hunger. I will have some food here, and some rest afterwards, if I may.'

'Ah! quite right, quite right! But, mon cher Prince, why this terrible fatigue and haste, when you were only to have arrived on the fifteenth—to-morrow?'

'I wanted the journey over, Excellency. I—— But I will say good-night. I am really very tired.'

'I have vanished, mon Prince. Good-night. I will report to Madame that you are feeding and sleeping, and well. Adieu!'

He was gone, and the heavy *portière* dropped behind him.

Then the wrinkled brow contracted, and the thin lips were compressed, and the gray eyes looked dangerous, as he passed, one after another, his creatures, dressed in the livery of the palace, hurrying to and fro on various missions directed by himself.

'So,' he muttered, 'this is her work! She brings his Majesty here that her cub may be under royal protection. She hastens *his* arrival by a day, that he may have audience before he reports at headquarters to-morrow. I must prevent this audience. I have my work before me for to-night. I must see Neitrine at once. I must have a military escort at dawn. Loris O—— must command it. If he accepts the command, I will send him far enough away; if he declines, and is supported by her, he shall be denounced as being in sympathy with the very movement I ask him to suppress—this new trouble in the south. Ah, my beloved! Nihilist, what should I do without thee?'

He entered his cabinet, and seated himself at a writing-table. A secretary sat opposite, writing rapidly—filling up blue papers and passing them over to the place where they would be signed by his chief. These scraps of paper would go out to-morrow, and destroy more human happiness than an army in battle. These weapons carried with them death and destruction. Only one armour could resist them—only gold could turn aside their deadly aim.

The secretary neither moved nor looked up when his chief entered and seated himself. Only when the old man had written and sealed a note, he stopped his pen

for an instant and glanced across the table. He saw a storm brewing there, and started when his master struck sharply a table-bell. The summons was instantly answered,

‘Take this to headquarters, and bring me a reply from General Neitrine.’

The man bowed and withdrew.

Then began the work of the evening—signing papers, which should on to-morrow carry mischief and destruction wherever they were directed. Verily, the pen is mightier than the sword!

In half an hour the messenger returned; General Neitrine could not be found.

‘Was the despatch left?’

‘No, Excellency.’

‘Take it back to whoever may be in command, and say it is of pressing importance.’

As the door closed upon the messenger the old man got up and walked about the room, evidently much disturbed. Then, as a thought seemed to bring him some new plan of action, he paused, and asked:

‘Have the papers concerning Kolmere been returned?’

‘Yes, Excellency; they are here.’

The secretary opened a drawer and took from it a package, untied it, and laid the papers it contained before his chief, then went on writing.

‘Has any action been taken in this matter since Saturday?’

‘No, Excellency. As soon as it was reported that Count Kolmere had left his post and taken refuge in the house of Baron Buxchhull, the watch was doubled. He

has never attempted to escape, nor has he once left his apartment.'

'Who is in the house?'

'Only the Baron, who reports himself detained by the illness of a provincial nephew.'

'Who have we there to report?'

'The steward, Excellency; a most discreet and trustworthy man.'

'There is a woman in the house, also in our service, is there not?'

'Yes, Excellency; but not to be trusted with this business. Larick is safest.'

'Larick, a Jew?'

'Yes, Excellency; but very honest and trustworthy.'

'Honest and trustworthy,' the secretary said of the man who acted the part of paid spy in his master's house! No wonder the chief sneered, as he answered:

'Trustworthy and honest where he is best paid. See to that, or do the work through other channels. The woman is safe enough, so long as she believes in our good Buloff, her lover. I shall dine now, and alone. Let me know what message comes from headquarters.'

'Yes, Excellency.'

The old man opened a door opposite that by which he had entered, and passed into a small beautifully-appointed *salon*, where a table was laid for a repast, and wine sparkled from cut-glass decanters. Wax candles burned in groups about the room from silver candelabra, and a bright fire blazed on the hearth.

Hangings, curtains, and *portières* were crimson, and the walls, wherever these draperies did not cover them, were hung with costly pictures and rare porcelain.

Verily the spider had chosen a goodly situation in which to spin his web—cast his nets.

The old man was served instantly and sumptuously ; after which he took his coffee and cigarette before the fire and tried to read.

But his soul was vexed. He had been outwitted, outdone in cunning—he could take no comfort ; and, besides this, the situation was dangerous. This young man had been meddling, as many before him had done, in the machinery which worked from this centre. He had got possession of awkward facts, and he had the means of using them, to the destruction of a system and its chief. Others, who had, perhaps, possession of more important information, had been easily dealt with.

The road ! All other roads to the monarch lay through the Bureau. Nothing official could reach the throne without first paying heavy toll there ; and if anything dangerous to themselves came their way, why, of course it was strangled ; and so were its authors, if nothing else would silence them.

But this young man could walk straight by, or through, or around the Bureau to the throne, and none could stop him except by stratagem ; and there were now only a few hours for that. So the man, feared by all who knew him—and many had felt his power—sat in sore vexation of spirit ; and as the hours went by, and the time for operation grew more and more limited, vexation gave way to alarm—alarm to fear. He walked up and down the apartment for some minutes, and was about to leave it, when a light tap at the door made him hastily open it.

The secretary handed his Excellency a letter.

With impatient fingers he broke the seal, and this is what he read :

‘DEAR HORRITOFF,

‘An escort of one hundred of the ——, commanded by Captain Prince O——, will be ordered to join you, or await your orders, at six o’clock to-morrow morning.

(Signed)

‘NEITRINE.

‘The order has been sent to Captain Prince O——, and will reach him immediately at the palace.—N.’

As the old man folded this letter, a diabolical smile passed over his wrinkled face.

‘So much for meddling women and rash young men,’ he muttered. ‘Now I must see Zetzel.’ Again he opened the door. ‘Send Zetzel here,’ he said ; and in a few moments a dark, villainous face appeared at the door, and a tall, thin man—cruelty and cunning in every feature and movement—entered.

‘Is everything prepared for an early start to-morrow?’

‘Yes, Excellency.’

‘Then you will meet the military escort at headquarters at half-past six. The escort will be commanded by Prince O——. You will take train to V——; then strike across country, as directed, and take the —— road to N——; there you will find further instructions. It is a dangerous business—let the military do the dangerous part. I cannot spare you. Soldiers and fighting material are easily obtained ; thinking, reasoning material is scarce. Let this young O—— taste danger—he who hold us civilians in contempt. Do you understand?’

‘Perfectly, Excellency.’

‘ Good-night. You shall return to promotion.’

The man stepped forward, seized the wrinkled hand of his chief, kissed it, and was gone.

Long the old man sat planning, plotting, accepting and dismissing suggestions for carrying out the work of the terrible organization—the government of a great country by conspiracy.

Rumours of danger and threatened attempts upon the peace of the city, aye, and upon the lives of the imperial family, had been circulated to such purpose, that the palace of the monarch had become the stronghold of the police force; and many were the grievous and crushing orders issued from the royal roof, and attributed to the royal master, which had been concocted and fulminated without his Majesty’s knowledge or sanction, but creating deadly hatred and feelings of determined revenge against him to whose authority they were credited.

This residence at the palace was a rare chance, an opportunity long sought and greedily seized upon, and it was now the centre from which started the secret springs of the infernal machinery which was working with oiled wheels. How rapidly it manufactured conspiracies and conspirators! How quickly it turned out villains ready to betray friend or country! How it drew into its terrible clutches honest men and women!

Those who were made of that stern stuff which prefers death to dishonour, they were crushed and buried; but few resisted long. The indifferent and the cowardly came out transformed, wearing the livery of the monster—generally a gorgeous one—going forth as recruiting officers, well paid, well fed, securing the needy, entrapping the unwary.

And the machinery for all this was to be, if not stopped, at least clogged, by this boy! He, the great engineer, to be outdone by a woman he hated, a youth he loathed! He would show both what it was to meddle with sharp-edged tools, to play with fire.

Rising, he left the apartment, and took his way towards those in which he had left the young Prince—the cause of all his immediate uneasiness. He had left trusty spies on guard to watch the young man's movements; but he felt so uneasy lest some mischance should spoil his plans, upon which so much depended, that he personally inspected those on duty, and upon one pretence or another managed to hover about the apartment of Prince Loris till he felt certain there could be no possibility, even if there was desire, for escape.

No sooner was Prince O—— satisfied of the departure of his officious visitor than he asked the attendant for pen and ink, which were soon before him.

'Whilst I write, bring me some food,' he said to the attendant, 'and be quick about it; I am famished.'

'Yes, Excellency. When will his Highness dine, and where?'

'Now, man—now and here. Bring me food and wine, and send this at once to Princess O——.'

The man took the note and departed, and with wonderful expedition returned with two other attendants and the repast, which the young man devoured without ceremony, and with an appetite only possessed by the young.

Then he set himself before the bright fire, smoking his cigarette, overcome with sleep, yet wanting the energy to get up and go to bed.

At last he summoned courage to call the attendant. He struck the bell beside him, and almost instantly he heard the door open.

‘Put out the candles; I shall retire,’ he said.

No reply, no sound. He turned, and there stood before the crimson *portière*, with the crimson firelight, falling on her, a radiantly beautiful woman; small in stature, only above the medium height, with golden hair rippling over a forehead of ivory; eyes as blue as indigo; neck and shoulders, like the finely-turned arms which just peeped between sleeve and glove, white and smooth as alabaster; her dress, rich and beautiful, of soft white velvet, fell away to a long train. On her breast and in her lovely hair glittered diamonds and sapphires. She seemed young to girlishness. Not a line had been made on that fair brow by Time; not a shade less golden was the soft waving hair; and the figure, round and beautifully outlined, might have belonged to a woman of twenty. And yet the stranger, when he turned in his chair and saw this vision of beauty, sprang up to his six feet, and, holding out his arms, exclaimed:

‘Mother!’

‘My darling, what joy to see you! You received my letter?’

‘Yes, little mother, and sent one back by your courier; but I have outridden him. I pushed on, as you wished, and have been twenty hours in the saddle, with a short rest ten hours ago.’

She sat down upon the arm of the deep, soft chair into which the young man had thrown himself, her arm around his neck, his pale face turned up to hers.

‘What have you heard, mother mine, that so frightened

you? More mysteries, I suppose. I knew, of course, some mischief was brewing, when I received orders to leave for Petersburg without a moment's delay or preparation. I do not now know whether I was escorted here under surveillance, or if I was in command of the escort. You may imagine I was relieved to get your message, and this invitation to come to the palace from his Majesty. What form does the conspiracy take toward me? What do you know, my beautiful mother?

'Oh, Loris, I know all; how you have investigated and brought to light crimes committed by our rulers, and which were buried in the silence of fear! I know you have won the animosity of that fiend Horritoff; and, but that I am here now, and have the confidence of our royal friend, your life were not worth a straw. Every movement, every word that has fallen from your lips since you began this most dangerous business, has been reported by Strakosch to Horritoff.'

'Strakosch!' the young man exclaimed. 'Oh, mother, not Strakosch! There you are misled; he is my very dearest, truest friend!

'My son, of all the bitterness of our experience, this is the hardest to bear, and has the worst effect upon our characters, this betrayal of trust. God knows whether by torture or by bribery this confidence of yours in Strakosch has been betrayed; but I have seen it in his own handwriting, a perfect diary of your movements, your conversations, your investigations of these dark deeds which were never intended to see the light.'

'Mother, you may be deceived. I must see this myself before I believe in the perfidy of my best friend.'

The young man's head fell upon his breast, and his voice was trembling with emotion.

'It is agony, my darling, for me to undeceive you, but I saw every word of a conversation you had with Strakosch written with his own hand. I can tell you enough to convince you. The memorandum was headed "Monday." The address, "Britzka." You rode with Strakosch to a place called Radna. You confided to him your love for a young girl, the daughter of that house, whose father you said 'had been exiled by the infernal machinations of Horritof's predecessor thirteen years ago. You said the work of the robbery of this family, begun by Neitriff, had been completed by Horritoff; that they, this noble Polish family, had been entirely despoiled of their property; the father, a strong reconcilable, had been exiled; the son proclaimed; the family ruined. You said the father had escaped from durance; that you had reason to believe, from circumstances innocently disclosed to you by the young girl, that the Count, her father, was now at the Château, concealed by the Countess. You declared your intention to bring this case before the Czar through me. Ah, my boy, you spoke your sentence then; and that sentence was banishment, exile, destruction. But, my boy, you are ill. Oh, Loris, my son, forgive me!'

From the bottle on the dessert-table beside her she poured out a full glass and held it to his lips. He drank it, and when his mother resumed her seat his head fell upon his breast, and his whole frame shook with emotion.

'Oh, mother, mother!' he almost sobbed. 'I have ruined this poor family—I who would give my life to save

them. I must be gone!' he cried, starting up. 'I will not sleep nor rest till I have returned to these people; and I will share their fate, whatever it may be. And as for that black heart, I will tear it from his traitor-breast! Oh, my mother, I loved and believed him! I shared everything I had with that man. I looked upon him like a brother. Mother,' the young man said again, throwing himself down beside her, 'this is all too terrible. You do not know the harm I have done. I do not know what fate may have overtaken them, and she—— Oh, my mother, I cannot endure it. She—my loved, my beautiful Wanda!—she had reason when she called me spy.'

'What, my son?'

'Mother, I cannot explain—my head seems in a whirl. I only feel, I cannot think.'

'Listen, my son, my Loris, my poor child! Listen! I must be heard, my darling! The moment I knew what I have just told you, I sought for and obtained protection for this family without disclosing any of my suspicions concerning your intentions towards the daughter. I made their safety and protection the subject of an earnest petition to his Majesty. I make few requests, and this was at once granted. And the very day you started from Petersburg, Colonel Busch—my dear old, my life-long friend—departed with instructions which will secure them from molestation until the matter can be more thoroughly investigated. There, my son, you need and must have rest. Sleep assured of the safety of your dear ones. Oh, Loris! you do not know how I long to see her and take her to my heart!'

'My own precious mother!' the young man cried; 'and I feared to tell you. I know not why; but I feared I

should have difficulty in winning your consent to my marriage with the daughter of an exiled man. God bless you, my good, my beautiful mother! Believe me, she whom you promise to receive as a daughter is worthy of even that honour.'

The young man folded her to his breast; then held her off at arm's length as he spoke; then fondly caressed her rippling hair. The colour had come back to his cheek, the light to his eyes. He looked supremely handsome.

'Now, my darling, will you go to bed?' she said.

He promised her, and with a parting good-night led her to the door and watched her slight figure pass the guard as she flitted down the long corridor, until a great red *portière*, through which she passed, shut her out from his sight.

When this curtain dropped behind her, the Princess found herself standing face to face with Horritoff.

For a single instant she paused, then, bowing gracefully, was about to pass the old man, who stood aside, bending in low salute to the beautiful visitant.

As she gained the opposite door and was about to pass through it, she turned, and seeing the other occupant of the room still standing where she had passed him, she said in French:

'I am full of good news to-night, Prince. My dear son has arrived, and I hope, on long leave. In fact, I believe he will pass the greater part of the winter with me.'

Whilst she spoke, Horritoff had approached, and now held aside the curtain of the door for the lady to pass through.

A curious look for a moment flitted over his withered and bronzed face, but, as the Princess finished speaking, he only said, with a low bow :

‘I have seen Prince O——, looking, I thought, well, though fatigued. I hope Madame the Princess is right, and that the Prince may be able to remain in Petersburg during the winter.’

‘Why should he not?’ she said. ‘His regiment is quartered at Britzka, in Poland, and he has been ordered home. If he were to be away from Petersburg, surely he would be with his regiment.’

She paused, then went towards the door, the curtain of which the General still held. Then, suddenly turning—so suddenly that the old man had no time to change the almost sardonic smile which made his wrinkled face hideous—she asked :

‘Do you know why he has been called home?’

She had caught the diabolical look on his face. The smile with which she began to speak faded away, and the words dropped from her lips slowly and unconnectedly, she gazing in the face before her as if she had been seized with some terrible idea of which her words formed no part. Then her beautiful lip curled with contempt. She turned and went on, stepping past him, unheeding the words of denial with which he was answering her question.

He stood for a moment after she had gone, then shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

‘*Frappe vite, frappe fort !*’ he muttered, as he descended the corridor and entered a small apartment belonging to the suite of the Princess.

Here he found one or two of the ladies and gentlemen

in attendance around a roulette-table, killing time, which must hang most heavily upon those who are in waiting upon great personages, who have nothing to do, and yet are never at liberty—whose only occupation, in fact, is waiting for they know not what.

Horritoff glanced around the table as he entered, and all evidence of mirth fled from the faces upon which his glance fell as if it were a blight. The only light in the room was from a shaded lamp, which hung over the card-table, beyond which the room was in semi-darkness, and even Horritoff's keen eyes did not at first discover two persons seated in an obscure corner. They were both women, and both young.

'Ah!' he said, when he became aware of their presence. 'Chère madame, there you are—and mademoiselle. Ah, this is a pleasure unexpected!'

'I have the advantage of you, then,' the younger of the two women replied; 'for I knew you were coming.'

'Ah, a presentiment!'

'Yes; by the pricking of my thumbs.'

'Then the evil genius is still to arrive, for I bring you good news.'

'Me? You, Prince, bring me good news? A great ambassador to a small court. How magnanimous to occupy your thoughts with anything so truly humble! Shall I kneel and receive the boon?'

'No; and, as punishment for ungraciousness, you shall not have my good news for twenty-four hours.'

'I am penitence, obedience, humility itself. Tell me, Prince. Here at your feet I implore thee! News—good news! Surely you will not deny me, when I tell you I

have never received good news in my life. Join me in my supplication, Maria,' the merry girl said, turning to her companion. 'If the Prince remain obdurate, I die!'

'Live, then,' the old man said, taking up the tone of banter, 'and learn that you accompany the Princess to Nice early next month.'

'Really?'

'Really.'

'And Maria?'

'Madame Kolmere desires to remain behind, I understand.'

'Is this true, Maria?' the girl asked.

'Yes,' answered her companion, looking up to Horri-toff as if for her reply. 'Yes, I am afraid I must remain in Petersburg for the present. My mother is far from well, and——'

Her eyes dropped, long dark lashes fell over them—and they were lovely eyes—and her pale cheek grew warm for a moment.

'Dear Maria,' the young girl said, taking her hand, 'do not be cast down. I saw Baroness Blenkenstein yesterday. She is not at all seriously ill. You are nervous and out of spirits to-night.'

'Tell us, Prince, all about the move into winter quarters. When do we start? Who beside myself and the other important personages are to go? How long do we stay?'

'I fear I cannot give you further particulars. I must away to my den, and for hours to hard labour.'

'I would offer to help you, Prince, only I know you are jealous of your prerogative, and carefully choose

those you consign to hard labour. So I will not detain you from your work, though I am sure most of your clients would willingly wait. I will not keep them in suspense. Adieu.'

'Au revoir, mademoiselle. To-morrow I hope for the happiness of meeting you at dinner.'

Both ladies rose and curtsied, and with the slightest recognition of those at the table the great man left them.

The palace clock strikes twelve.

Horritoff gives orders to his valet that he will retire now, and be called in the morning-at five o'clock. The pale secretary in the outer room is relieved by another, who seats himself at the table and begins work where the other has left off.

All is still, save the scraping of the pen and the rustling of the paper. One o'clock strikes. Two o'clock, and with the last stroke comes a tap at the door, and the secretary starts up.

A spy with a report.

Tablets in hand, the secretary takes the report.

A despatch from headquarters had come about eleven for Prince Loris. Some misunderstanding seemed to have taken place in the antechamber, and the officer had been obliged to depart without serving his orders. The despatch had been sent back, and had just arrived now, and the officer, accompanied by an attendant, had gone to Prince Loris's room to deliver it. Should he follow them? Such had been his orders at eleven.

'Certainly,' the secretary said, and the man darted away.

He knew a nearer way to Prince Loris's apartment, and by this he reached the young man's little *salon*, just as the attendant tapped on the panel of the door; and this is what happened. It was instantly opened by the servant who had been left in attendance by order of Horritoff.

'A despatch from the General, for Prince Loris,' the bearer of the message said, holding forth the paper.

'He sleeps, Excellency,' the servant replied, 'and is not to be disturbed.'

'This is imperative, and must be put in his Highness's hands at once.'

The officer spoke as one in authority; and the servant hesitatingly took the despatch, and was followed into the little *salon* by the two others. He crossed over the room, and tapped at the door of the sleeping apartment.

No answer.

Again the knock was repeated, louder this time.

Silence.

'Go in,' the officer in command of this expedition said. 'No time must be lost. The Prince must be roused.'

The servant opened the door.

A dim light burned from a night-lamp standing on the chimney. This the servant turned up till all things in the room were visible.

He turned his eyes to the bed. It was unoccupied!

The attendant uttered an exclamation, which brought the others to the door. He immediately searched the *chambre de toilette*, and, re-entering the bedroom pale with fear, encountered the others.

'He is gone,' gasped the man, 'gone; and I have not

slept—I have never left my post! No one has passed out; there is no other way. What shall I do?’

The man was beside himself with fear.

‘His Excellency must be told,’ he continued, ‘and then——’

The officer, whose only duty it was to deliver the despatch, failing in this, left the apartment and the palace; and the attendant, after once more carefully examining the chambers, went ruefully to report to his superiors. As he passed from one corridor to another, giving the password to the innumerable guards who watched the palace, the man was more and more mystified. Had Prince O—— left his apartment by any door known to the attendant he would have been challenged by the many who watched without, and the attendant must have heard those nearest the door where he sat all night.

Pale as death and trembling in every limb, the poor man reached the apartment of Horritoff. He passed the one watchman at the door and tapped. A worn face with a pen between thin lips appeared.

‘His Excellency,’ the attendant whispered:

‘Come in,’ the secretary said, having taken the pen from his lips. When the door closed upon the two, ‘What is it?’ the secretary demanded.

‘Prince O——, Excellency; he has gone. A despatch came for him from headquarters. I was in attendance, with instructions to notify you immediately if his Highness left his apartment. I neither slept nor left my post for an instant, and when this despatch came, and I was ordered to call his Highness, he was gone, vanished, spirited away, I will swear, by the——’

‘Hush-sh!’ the secretary said. ‘You who neglect your duty have many words.’

‘But, Excellency, listen to me—do, I implore you! I never neglected my duty; I sat at the door——’

Here a bell was struck sharply in the next room, and the secretary, with a look scarcely less scared than the attendant, hastened to the den of the old fox within.

‘What is it?’ inquired Horitoff from the bed-clothes. ‘Who is there?’

‘The attendant upon Prince O——, Excellency, to report that his Highness has left his apartments.’

‘Send the man here.’

The trembling wretch was called in, and the secretary withdrew.

Horritoff sat up in bed as the man entered.

‘What is your report?’ his Excellency asked impatiently.

‘Only what I have said, Nobleness. I never left my post for a single instant, I never closed my eyes, and the doors were never opened, and yet he is gone.’

‘What!’ the old man shrieked, at the same time striking the bell on the table beside him. ‘What is this idiot talking about?’ he asked, as the secretary hurriedly entered.

‘He reports, Excellency, that a despatch arrived for Prince O—— from headquarters, urgently requiring his Highness’s immediate presence; and that the Prince could not be found.’

‘Could not be found? What the devil are you talking about? Where had he gone? What are you both standing staring at? Can’t you speak? Here, Ivan,

come and dress me ! Now, can *you* tell me coherently what this fool means ?

This to the secretary, as the valet enters and begins folding the shrivelled form of his master in a great dressing-gown.

‘ Excellency, I have received no further report. I have only this instant received what your Highness has heard.’

As he finished speaking, the secretary looked imploringly at the attendant, who now dropped on his knees.

‘ Excellency——’

Horritoff held up his hand.

‘ Take down this man’s report,’ he said to the secretary, who produced immediately tablets and stood ready.

‘ When did Prince O—— retire ?’

‘ Immediately after the visit of Madame the Princess, his Highness’s mother.’

‘ When was that ?’ turning to the secretary.

‘ Eleven o’clock, as reported, Excellency,’ the secretary replied.

‘ Did you assist his Highness to bed ?’ he said to the attendant.

‘ I remained in the room, Excellency, until his Highness retired. I then put out the candles, turned down the lamp, and took up my post at the door as instructed. There I stood till the arrival of the officers with the despatch.’

‘ And then ?’

‘ Then, Excellency, I entered the rooms and searched them all. His Highness had gone—gone, Excellency, and there was not a trace of him.’

‘ You will report yourself to the Superintendent,’ his Excellency said, and the poor man left the great

presence, well knowing that he was to be sent where he could tell no State secrets, and firmly believing his late charge, Prince O——, to have been spirited away by this arch-enemy of human happiness.

Horritoff paused, with his hands supporting his chin.

What is to be done? If Loris be in possession of the knowledge credited him, he must not be allowed to see the Czar; and how is that to be prevented, when the young man's mother is in the Palace with the authority of an Empress, unless the orders of his superior officers reach him, and he leaves in obedience to them? These he will obey, if they can be delivered; but that seems now impossible.

General Neitrine will probably appoint another officer in command; for though Neitrine fears Horritoff, and would do anything to oblige him, the soldier has no idea that there is a police conspiracy on foot, and that he is assisting in it.

The yellow tint of the parchment skin looked ghastly in its peculiar pallor as the old man sat thinking. He could not endure the presence of the secretary, so he returned to his *salon*, and muttered and paced the room for hours.

CHAPTER II.

THE SPIDER AND THE FLY.

LORIS O——, almost overcome with fatigue and the cold of his late forced march, had scarcely sunk into the profound sleep of the young and weary, when the stillness of his chamber was broken by a curious grating sound, unmistakably the grating of a key in a disused lock. Cautiously the key was inserted, slowly it was turned; then there was a pause; then a scarcely perceptible shaking of the silken panel between the bed and the chimney; then a parting of some drapery, and again all was still. A night-light burned in a corner, but this part of the bedroom was in deep shadow, and not a sound was to be heard but the heavy breathing of the young man, and the wind beating upon the closely-curtained windows.

After some minutes of this silence, a slight movement, and then out of the darkness of the aperture which was now visible a face took shape. Then, framed in the crimson hangings, a figure became more and more distinct as it advanced into the room, gliding over the floor as noiselessly as a ghost, and like a ghost, true to its traditions, bringing a cold, chilling air into the room.

The tall figure stole across the polished floor toward

the dim light, stooped, lighted a candle, and, turning around, disclosed the stern white face of an old woman.

She stood a moment, candle in hand, gazed upon the sleeper, then passed noiselessly over to the door, examined its fastenings and dropped the heavy drapery over it. Then she stooped above the young man. The light she held in her hand shone up into a white, severe face, thin lips, a broad white forehead, contracted by deep wrinkles between heavy eyebrows; a tall, gaunt, weird figure clothed in black garments which seemed to cling to her body.

For some moments she stood at the bedside, apparently listening. Then she put forth her hand and gently shook the sleeper.

‘My master!—Loris!’

Not a sign of awakening.

Again she listened; again shook the arm which was thrown over the silken couch, this time with determination.

He turned on his pillow, and would have sailed away again to the land of dreams; but the woman took advantage of the slight evidence of consciousness, and shook him more violently. He opened his eyes, and, starting up to a sitting posture, gazed with frightened look around the room. Then, as if he just began to realize the situation and that someone was near him, he turned toward the figure at his bedside.

‘Marta!’ he exclaimed, in a startled voice. ‘What is it? Where am I? My mother?’

‘Hush—sh!’ the woman answered in a whisper. ‘Rise, my master, quickly, and come with me. Quickly, my

son—here, wrap this about thee. Here are slippers ; be quick and silent. Come.'

Hastily she wrapped the heavy cloak about him, quickly she stooped and put on his slippers. Silently and cautiously she led him out by the way she had entered, dropping the heavy tapestry behind her and locking and bolting the door.

Then he followed her down a narrow staircase, she holding the candle to guide his steps ; then through a door, locked after they had passed out, along a wide corridor to an arched doorway, where, lifting a very heavy curtain, they found themselves in the tribune of a chapel.

Through this, avoiding heavy velvet-covered seats, they came to an organ, which seemed to occupy the entire end of the gallery and bar the way. But the old woman passed around this, and at the back opened a small door, which led them to a bedroom. Here they paused, the woman first locking and barring the door through which they had passed.

She set down the candle on a dust-covered table, and turned to her companion.

'Thank God, my son, we are safe !'

'Well, Marta, if that be so, perhaps you will tell me what this means.'

'I know not all, Loris ; but I know this means danger to you. Your mother waits you. We have now to cross the corridor, and it is perfectly dark. I put out the lights as I came through, for the place is full of spies and police. I dropped the heavy curtains across the hall and put out the lights. So I must lead you to your mother's door. I know my way. Come !'

She put the candle down near the door, caught her master's hand, extinguished the light, and led her young companion out into darkness. Cautiously and slowly she moved along the dark passage, stopping from time to time to listen, then moving on a few steps, till at last she stopped and lifted aside a heavy curtain, and gently tapped on a panel. The door instantly opened into a small chamber, hung with rose-colour and lighted by many wax candles, under a group of which stood the Princess.

She sprang forward like a flash of light, and in an instant was in her son's arms.

'Oh, Loris, my darling, I have been in intense anxiety since Marta went to fetch you! I conjured up all manner of accidents and encounters that might have befallen you. Come in, my son; sit here. I am cold with fear.'

She led him to a couch, and sat down beside him—she, in her soft white garments, almost buried in the dark folds of his richly-furred wrapper, his strong arm around her, his pale face and white forehead, crowned by a mass of dark, short curls, bending over her golden head, whilst Marta shut and locked the door by which they had entered, and dropped the curtains over window and door, to intercept the view of any curious eye, of which she knew there were many in the neighbourhood.

The room was a boudoir, rich in all that makes the fascination of such an apartment. The walls were hung with pale rose-coloured brocade, fitted with panels, and alternating with pictures of the Watteau school, before which hung shaded candles. Carpets and *portières* of the same rich materials as the wall-hangings hid doors and

windows, inlaid tables and luxuriously upholstered chairs and sofas rested upon softest tapestry, which carpeted the floor. Easels, draped with gauze-like silks, supported portrait drawings: photograph albums, in costly covers, lay about; a wood-fire burnt upon a hearth inlaid, as was the chimney, with fine arabesque tiles; and the softly-shaded wax candles threw a subdued but beautiful light over all.

‘What is this, my mother?’ Prince Loris asked. ‘More plots and plans—more conspiracies? And what have I done to win such distinguished regard?’

‘Oh, my son, I am so weary of it all! My strength, physical and mental, is failing me. I feel I cannot much longer stand guard; and still, so long as this is my post, I must never sleep. For myself I care not; I fear them not. I can outwit them, and still stand between them and him. They dare do nothing openly to me. He is still able to protect those who have his confidence. They know I have that. Bribes and threats, conveyed by the underground mail, have equally failed. Poison has been tried; it reached the wrong person. Here I am, and here I am likely to stay, they say, unless the new instrument, created by their cruelty, succeeds in removing me, as it has done so many others, out of their way.’

‘What is that, my mother?’

‘Nihilism, my son. I am shown to the poor oppressed citizen and peasant as a confidential adviser and favourite, urging harsh measures; calling for great sums of money with which to enrich myself and my family; advising, demanding new and heavy taxation, and the grinding down of the poor, to supply my reckless expenditure. Is it

wonderful that these poor suffering ones should seek to take the life of one so powerful, so cruel, so rapacious? Smarting from blows inflicted by fiends, these poor wretches are taught to look upon our royal master as the source of their suffering, and upon those near and dear to him as his instigators and advisers. To rid the world of such a tyrant and his confederates the poor people are brought to believe their first duty, a sin for which pardon is not only promised, but rich reward awaiting them. If they succeed, they believe that their names will stand beside those great patriots whom the world delights to honour. If they fail, they die martyrs to a holy cause.'

'My mother, can it be true that these people are deluded by our enemies, and that our enemies are those who should be our protectors, our defenders?'

'True, my son? Can you doubt it? I tell you, Loris, my son, I have proof strong enough to hang them all. Could we find executioners? What can be done with a conspiracy which includes nearly the whole governing body? Who is to see the monarch obeyed if he condemns a government in a country without a constitution—where official despotism prevails? No, my son, nothing but a revolution can save us. A revolution which shall begin at the throne. The Czar must meet the *people*. All between these two must be crushed out! But, my dear Loris, to speak of yourself. Only yesterday, when I heard you were ordered home, I also heard that you were to command an expedition. I soon learnt that it was a dangerous one. Then I knew you had in some way become troublesome, and were to be *removed*. That is the term now used for assassination. I flew to his Majesty. Horritoff had been before me. The Emperor treated my

anxiety as a foolish woman's fears calculated to interfere with your career. All I could obtain from him was an invitation for you to come here to the palace upon your arrival. Remember, you were only expected to-morrow. I had no sooner obtained leave for you to come here than I despatched my faithful courier to hasten your steps, and, before you reached the palace last night—for it is now past midnight—I had unearthed some of their plans and intentions. And since I saw you two hours ago I have mastered their plan of campaign. Your arrival yesterday, instead of to-day, was an event—a contingency—for which they were totally unprepared. General Neitrine told me in Horritoff's presence that you could scarcely reach headquarters before nightfall of the 15th; and I did not in the least hope for your arrival until this morning, an hour or so before you were to report. And my joy at your appearance last night was only equalled by Horritoff's chagrin. I did not know till I had parted from you to-night the full depth of their designs. Nor do I now, but I have learnt by trustworthy means that Horritoff has asked General Neitrine for an escort early to-morrow morning, that he has asked that you be ordered to command it; and the order is probably at this moment on its way back to headquarters, its bearer having failed to find you.'

'My mother!' Loris said, jumping up, 'this must not be. I am a soldier. I must not shirk my orders, whatever they may be. My dear little mother,' he continued, seeing her face turn ashy pale, 'fear nothing for me. I must obey my commanding officer, even though he order me to face death. You know this, my darling mother; but I beg you to quiet your fears. I must sleep now, and so must

you; but I must report, as you say I am desired to do, at dawn.'

'What is this, my son?' the Princess said, looking wildly up into his face. 'You will go and leave me brokenhearted to mourn a murdered son, as I have a deceived and assassinated husband? Leave me alone, unprotected, and go where you are not even commanded to go? Mind, I know nothing of this order. I only guess—surmise—by their great effort to find General Neitrine late last night. My son! think of me. Think of one other, if you put yourself beyond the power of protecting her, of saving her family! I promise you, Loris, that if they find you here, and bring an order, you shall have it. Now go to bed. You are overcome with fatigue. I am ill and exhausted. There, my boy, you will obey your little mother?'

'I will go to bed, my darling, that I promise you, for I am nearly dead with sleep and fatigue and the cold of my march. And I really do not see why I should run in pursuit of Horritoff or Neitrine either. I will go down very early, and that will be some hours in advance of my orders to report. Good-night, little mother. Where do you mean to bestow me?'

'Here, in my own apartment, dearest. And, oh, Loris! let us go away from this. I am determined that you shall not go upon the expedition planned for you. If you do, I shall never see you more. I determined, before I saw you, to beg the Czar to accept your resignation, and allow you to retire to your Hungarian estates. I have gone through so much, that this fresh anxiety on your account will kill me.'

'And you, my mother?' Loris said tenderly.

‘I, my son? I would gladly go with you, if—if—if I could. My life here is a bitter one. But, sweet or bitter, it belongs to him. I cannot leave him. I must stay so long as I am wanted.’

‘My darling mother shall not stay here, or elsewhere, one hour beyond her own sweet will. And, sometimes, my own mother, I have wished you away. You are here an object of jealousy, and therefore of hatred. Your position is not understood. I——’

The Princess glanced up into her son’s face as he paused, evidently embarrassed, whilst her own cheek and brow became crimson.

‘My son,’ she said hurriedly and excitedly, ‘say no more. You have a right to decide this question of the very first and nearest importance to us both. Only, from the counsels which you will hold with yourself, be careful not to exclude the consideration that it is in obedience to your dying father’s commands that I am here. Here, in an atmosphere of intrigue, of poisonous vice, reeking with hatred, jealousy, and malice, he who loved me better than his life left me, without fear of the consequences upon my own character—and he was right there. But, alas! he forgot other consequences, or, if he remembered them, he allowed them to be outweighed by the service he thought I should be able to render his royal master and friend. Had I been a man, it would have been well; but a woman, young, trusting, and——’

‘Very beautiful, my sweet mother. It was not well, perhaps. But all that you have suffered may be soon an unpleasant memory only. I will make up in affection, in implicit obedience, in perfect confidence, for hecatombs of petty offenders. You will live with your children,

your sons, and your daughter the Queen of Hearts, my lovely mother. And now let us to bed, and dream of Utopia.'

'I should be happy, my beloved Loris, with such a son. Yes, dearest, we will fly from this together. I shall rejoice for ever to get you beyond the reach of the evil influence of a Court where intrigue, like a loathsome slime, binds together the social and political elements; at every step you cross the filthy trail of the serpent who winds his coil in the Bureau and issues forth but to poison the air. But, my son, once within the influence of the reptile, it is no easy matter to break away. With the strongest, with the most determined intention, you find that, as you struggle, the meshes of an invisible net close down upon and entangle you; and, whilst in these entanglements, villainous influences are brought to bear upon you. Those nearest and dearest to you are placed in danger. Move, and you destroy them. Their safety is the price of your submission. If you be a lover, she you love, and perhaps all belonging to her, are entrapped, denounced—lost or saved by the price of your silence and your honour. Once yield to the torture, and you are ruined irrevocably. You find yourself forced to obey orders from which your soul shrinks with horror, to witness in silence the persecution of the weak and innocent, to become an accomplice in crimes of the foulest description. In a word, you become a brother of the evil band. It is to save you from this fate, my beloved son, this worse than death, that I am working now. Good-night, my darling!'

As she spoke the last words, she led her boy to her own chamber, into which he followed Marta, and throw-

ing himself on the bed he was asleep before the old nurse had removed his wrap and slippers, covered him with the quilt as she had done in his infancy, and left the room.

‘Now, my mistress,’ she said, returning to the *salon*, ‘you must also retire—indeed you must seek rest if you are to undertake this work. I will lie down here and keep guard; come, my beloved.’

‘Be it so,’ the Princess said; ‘I fear sleep, and my eyes and brain are far apart; but you are right, I must have rest. I will go to the blue chamber. Let me be called should any attempt be made to reach my Loris. Do not open the door to anyone.’

She followed Marta out of the room to an inner chamber, which with her own, now occupied by Prince Loris, joined the boudoir, and in a few moments Marta returned, wrapped herself in a soft, warm shawl, and was soon asleep on the couch before the fire.

How long she had slept she did not know, but she became aware, between dreaming and waking, of a gentle tap on the panel of the door, and as, fully aroused, she listened, the knock, timid and uncertain, was repeated.

Marta went to the door, first dropping the heavy silk *portière* over that of her mistress, and listened. She heard a rustling sound and again the timid knock. Putting her lips to the keyhole, she asked in a whisper:

‘Who is it?’

‘I, Madame Kolmere. Open the door quickly, Marta.’

Madame the Princess’s own woman-in-waiting; it could be no harm to open the door to her. It must be something of grave importance to bring her here in the middle of the night.

The door was opened.

Madame Kolmere, in a long white wrapper, the hood of which was drawn over head and face, glided in, and old Marta closed and locked the door behind her.

'Now, what is this, madame?' Marta asked, not a little vexed at having been led to disobey orders and admit even the young attendant and confidential friend of her mistress.

'Marta,' the visitor answered, throwing back the hood of her cloak and showing a beautiful face pale as marble, 'I must see the Princess this instant!'

'Then you cannot see my mistress,' the old nurse said; 'neither you, nor anyone else. So you need not come waking and disturbing me at this hour.' And as she spoke she moved toward the door as if to dismiss her unwelcome guest. But Madame Kolmere had taken advantage of this moment, when the old woman's back was turned, and when Marta looked around she saw to her terror that the Countess had reached the door of the Princess's room, where at this moment her young master slept, all unconscious of the scene which was being enacted in, whispers on the other side of the chamber wall.

'Stop,' Marta said. 'If you go in there, you will be sorry for it. Stop! I say.'

The old face looked so frightened that Madame Kolmere drew back instantly, and coming again close to Marta, laid an icy hand upon hers, and whispered hoarsely:

'Marta, I tell you I must see the Princess. Is her Highness here?'

'Yes, and somebody else too,' Marta said; 'and I

advise you to take yourself to your own apartment. My mistress will not see you, I can assure you.'

Madame Kolmere turned to the door with a startled look.

'Oh, Marta!' she said, with the door-handle in her hand. 'Why did you not tell me this at once? Oh, I implore you, dear, kind old Marta, say nothing about my visit. I am so frightened. Good-night.'

She slipped through the door, which Marta held scarcely far enough open to allow her to pass through, and fled down the corridor.

'There's a nice story to set afloat,' Marta said, as she relocked the door; 'but, fortunately, I can set all right to-morrow before harm comes of it. Nothing else would have got rid of her and her blue paper. That was for my master; no doubt the order my dear mistress has been dodging all the night. She thought I did not see it under her cloak. Ah! old Marta has sharp eyes when hawks hover about her birdlings; and to think she should lend herself to such work! I wonder how he secured her, poor, poor woman! She is in bad hands.' So saying, the faithful old creature, for the second time that night, fell asleep.

Secure, and for the time happy in her dear son's safety, the Princess in a beautiful chamber all glimmering with satin and lace and lit by a perfumed lamp, slept calmly, as if no sorrow had ever disturbed the white bosom, beneath which beat a true and loving and loyal heart. And in the room close by the young Prince forgot his trouble, aye, even his love, and slept the sleep of the young. And in his palatial chamber sleeps the King. Sleeps guarded to the very bedside by armed.

men, who watch and in turn are watched by others. Only the old man, the spider in the antechamber, and those of his pickets on duty, sleep not.

He, the central figure in the web he has spun, the great inventor and creator of its fine fibres, the creature dreaded by those who know his subtle powers, and feared more than a mortal and contagious disease, finds himself confronted by a difficulty which may prove his ruin and end his dark career, and out of all his schemes and amongst all his instruments he finds nothing to meet the emergency—nothing upon which he can rely except this one plan, so far unsuccessful. And all this trouble and terrible suspense is brought about by a young man, a mere boy, no match for the very least of the satellites which surround the great light of the Bureau, but possessing advantages of position the importance of which it was difficult to gauge.

The old man sat deep down in the cushions of his chair, thinking—thinking—thinking; planning plots dismissed as soon as formed, his thoughts chasing each other through a brain crowded with contrivances for every emergency but this. Always coming back to the first suggestion of his mind as the only probable or possible means of ridding himself of this most dangerous boy, who could, unhindered, take his plaint up to the throne, and cause inquiries which must result in the destruction of the system of which he was the mainspring—the destruction of hundreds, nay, thousands, of whom he was chief, or the destruction of— Ah, well, even in his thoughts he did not like to give shape to that word.

A nervous tap at the door. He does not hear it. It is repeated, and this time he springs from his chair and

opens the door. Madame Kolmere, pale as the garment she wears, staggers in. The old man has assumed, like a transparent mask, the usual grim smile; but under it, and through it, a look of hatred and malice appears, ghastly to behold. He courteously places a chair, into which the young woman fairly drops; and then, as he sees the blue paper in her hand, his eyes glare and his lips grow white under the grizzly moustache.

'I fear,' he says, trying to command his voice, 'madame has not been successful in delivering my little missive.'

'No, Excellency. I did my best, but it was impossible. I went to the Princess's apartment; I tried to force my way to her presence; I was stopped by her Hungarian woman: "Madame the Princess cannot be seen. Madame the Princess is in attendance."'

The young woman's eyes dropped, and a slight colour, like the petal of a rose, overspread her white cheek.

'What are you saying?' the old man cried, surprised out of his usual affected calmness. 'What do you say? In attendance at four o'clock in the morning, and his Majesty retired at twelve? What is this, Madame la Comtesse? Explain yourself.'

'Your Excellency knows that "in attendance" is the term we are instructed to use when the Princess attends the Czar.'

'And you, her Highness's waiting-woman, have the audacity to tell me that the Princess is—is—with— Oh, Madame Kolmere! I thought you, at least, above this Court gossip and scandal. There is not, nor has there ever been, the slightest foundation for this suspicion. Take care how you harbour it yourself; see that no one you can control dares to discuss his Majesty's private

affairs in this way. But enough of this. You were entrusted with a message—simply to deliver that paper into the hands of Loris, Prince O——. It is absolutely necessary that he has that despatch before six o'clock. It is now half-past four. The Prince is in the palace. I do not know where, but his mother does. You must find her. Tell her this packet is from the General-in-Chief; that its delivery to her son is of the very greatest importance; that life and death depend on it, and say anything you think discreet to induce her to give you the opportunity of putting it into his own hands.

' Now listen, Madame Kolmère; you have disobeyed my wishes, my orders, on an excuse strong enough, were it known, to send you to the mines. How dare you and your gossiping friends think and surmise and suspect and gossip about your superiors? You have your beautiful head so full of things that only concern yourself and your friends, that you cannot plan a means of carrying out orders of the greatest importance, and you allow the word of an old servant to turn you away, and you bring me back this despatch, upon the delivery of which lives may depend—lives too precious to be named in connection with danger. You conduct your own affairs far differently, beautiful Countess. Your visit to a certain house, where lurks a certain person said to be steeped to the lips in treason. Ah, I am right, I see! Yes, and that most delicate and successful negotiation by which a large sum of money is secured to send a certain person out of the country; right again; and—— But I need go no further. You see, I know all, and you are not surprised that, knowing your ability, your great ability, sweet Countess, I am angered at the careless way in which you have

performed my work. Go now. Try again. Reach Prince O——, if possible; but if that be impossible, send this paper (mind you call it a letter) through the Princess, and get her to tell you that she delivered it to her son. Go now, I will await you here, and remember that upon the success of your mission depends the fate of those you love, and whose life I hold in the hollow of my hand.'

He held out his wrinkled fingers, made to form the hollow of the deadly hand, and the young woman, whose pallid face wore a look of supremest fear, stretched forth her swan-like neck as if to see the fate he held in his palm.

The manner and tone of the old man as he gave utterance to these words were indescribable. He came quite close to the poor creature, who stood like some innocent thing awaiting the spring of the serpent which was to devour her. He spoke in a voice scarcely above the curious monotone of his ordinary conversational purr, but his eyes glared upon her, and as he finished the woman uttered a sound of fear, as if she had been shown some dreadful object, but stood still staring before her.

'There, there,' he said; 'go now. Do your work, and fear nothing if you make Horritoff your friend. Au revoir, fair Countess; I will await your answer here. Au revoir.'

He led her to the door, bowed low, and left her clutching the despatch as if clinging to it for life.

Slowly, mechanically she made her way back to the apartment of the Princess, dazed, bewildered, unable to think clearly. One idea alone possessed her: that upon the delivery of the paper she held in her hand depended the life of her young husband, whose hiding-place she

saw was known to the arch-fiend whom she had just left. Everything else was in confusion in her brain. This fact stood out alone and urged her forward.

She found herself at the door of Madame O——'s *salon* without any settled plan of action. She knocked without knowing or feeling the unseasonableness of her visit; and when the door was again opened by Marta, she could only gasp out a few words, and then fell heavily into a chair.

The old nurse was alarmed at the apparent fear and suffering of the poor young creature before her.

'Mon Dieu!' she said. 'What is the matter? What brings you back in the night, Countess? What has happened?'

'My husband!' the Countess gasped. 'Oh, Marta, for the love of heaven tell your mistress my husband's life depends upon my seeing her at once!'

Marta, now thoroughly roused and frightened, went immediately to the Princess, taking up hastily a candle as she passed to the room in which her mistress slept. There she found everything as she had left it an hour ago, and the Princess awake. She was beginning to explain, when she found Madame Kolmere following her.

'What is this?' the Princess said, starting up. 'Madame Kolmere here at this hour! Must I, then, be invaded in my bedchamber against my will?'

'Oh, Princess, forgive—pity me! I do not know what I am doing. I am frightened, bewildered, half mad. My husband—my poor, poor Paul—is lost! You alone, Princess, can save him, I think—I believe. Do listen to me, dear Princess! Send Marta away, and listen to me!'

Marta, without further orders than those conveyed by a look from her mistress, retired. The Princess sat up in bed. Madame Kolmere knelt at her side.

'Be calm now, Maria,' the Princess said; 'be calm, if you wish to save time, as I presume you do, by your coming to me at this unusual hour. Try to collect yourself, and tell me coherently what it is you want.'

Madame Kolmere seized and kissed the hand of her companion, and then began her story.

'Princess, do you see this paper? Well, I am to see this delivered to Prince Loris, your son, or to hear from your lips that your son has received it. Upon my success in this depends the safety, the life of my poor husband, who, accused of complicity in some treason, of which he had not even heard, lies in hiding at his uncle's house here in Petersburg. Ah, Princess, if you could know what I have endured the past ten days, you would pity me; and if you could have seen and heard the interview through which I have this moment passed, you would wonder at my strength lasting to bring me here. What shall I do?—oh! what shall I do?'

The poor young creature buried her head in the bed-clothes, and sobbed piteously.

'Hush!' the Princess said, laying her hand upon the beautiful head. 'Be comforted, dear. You have made me your friend by your frankness, and by your sorrow and suffering. Listen! Do not lose a word I say. All will be well, dear, if we are true to one another. We have a battle to fight. We must win; for your husband, my son, are the lives we work for.'

'You, Princess? You in trouble?—you, whom we think all-powerful? Impossible!'

‘Never mind me now, Maria. Listen! Of what is Count Kolmere accused?’

‘Of Nihilistic sympathies, Highness. He was ordered to join and command a guard to a military train. He received his orders nearly six hours too late. The train was reported to have been in danger. The official swore he had delivered the despatch in time. Evidence was manufactured in the usual way to prove that my poor Paul was holding interviews and intercourse and corresponding with suspicious characters. He was called home—arriving, found himself surrounded by spies and entangled in difficulties; and, yielding to the entreaties of unwise or malicious advisers, he tried to leave the country, first sending in his resignation, which was not accepted.’

‘But, Maria, did he try to desert?’

‘No, no, Highness. He had sought and obtained six months’ leave, and he only tried to escape the vigilance of the fiend who seemed determined to destroy him.’

‘Listen, Maria! When are you to report to Horritoff on the subject of this despatch?’

‘Now, Excellency. Good heavens! he waits. I must be gone!’

‘Go back, Maria. Tell him you succeeded in reaching me; that you impressed me with the importance of this paper, and of the pressing necessity of placing it in the hands of my son. Tell him that Prince Loris shall have it the moment he leaves his Majesty in the morning. Do not forget one word of this! Then communicate with your husband, and prepare him to come to the palace at eleven o’clock. The Emperor will send for him, I believe,

and for you ; but I feel sure that he is safe. Now go—fly ! Horritoff will suspect something if you stay.'

'God Almighty bless you !' the young woman said. 'I will obey you to the very letter.'

'Stop, stop !' the Princess cried. 'You must not go back to Horritoff with that changed face. He will suspect—he will know ! There, that is better ; and, besides, my friend, we are not safe yet. There—go.'

A few moments later Madame Kolmere tapped at the blue door, and stood before the great master.

'Well ?' he said graciously, as he observed that the despatch had been left behind.

Madame Kolmere trembled in every limb, as she began her story.

'I have seen the Princess, Excellency. Her Highness was in bed, asleep. I insisted upon seeing her. She admitted me when she heard that my business concerned her son. I repeated every word you had instructed me to use. She took the letter, and assured me it should be placed in the hands of Prince Loris the moment his Highness left his Majesty in the morning.'

Horritoff started, and his face grew a shade paler or more lividly sallow as he asked :

'Did Princess O—— inform you that her son was in his Majesty's apartments now ?'

'No, Excellency.' She said just what I have repeated to you.'

'What was the impression made on your mind by this information ? Did it occur to you that the Princess intended to convey the impression that her son was now in the royal apartments, or that he was to have an early audience ?'

‘I thought, Excellency, that Prince Loris was probably to have an early audience.’

‘Then, did you make any effort to gain intelligence as to where this young man might be passing the night?’

‘Ah! I know that,’ Madame Kolmere replies, greatly relieved that at last she can really give some information without compromising the situation. ‘I know Prince Loris is lodged in the palace; he came only this night, or, I suppose I must say, last night, and Princess O—— visited him after dinner in his apartments.’

Horritoff gave her a scrutinizing look; but Madame Kolmere had somewhat regained confidence, and met the look with one so innocent that the old fox was for once deceived.

‘Au revoir, Madame la Comtesse,’ he said, ‘opening a door which led by a narrow corridor to the part of the palace she occupied. ‘Au revoir.’ It will be better that you go this way. People will be stirring in the palace; it is past five o’clock.’

He smiled grimly, and she passed out. He closed the door, and locked it, and the smile left his face for a look of wicked malice—a look of almost ferocious hatred and revenge.

‘Half-past five o’clock. I am beaten, and by her!’

He walked up and down the narrow limits of his chamber like a caged hyena, muttering threats and threatenings. He had tried all the agencies within his reach to secure the removal of this boy before time should be given him for the development of a plan of which his spies had forewarned him. He knew the nature of the information in the possession of Prince Loris; and he knew that once this information, with the evidence

which he was informed accompanied it, was placed before the Emperor, he was a ruined man, and must fall ; for this information in possession of the young Prince would not come alone. From various quarters threatening clouds were rising, and much political disturbance had already reached the atmosphere around the throne. This would be the final blast—this would raise a storm, and Horritoff well knew he and his band of robbers with their ill-gained booty were doomed.

Yes, a crisis was impending ; an avalanche had gathered strength, and was ready to fall and crush all before it. It must be stopped ! What could do that ? What was powerful enough to shatter it if it came down upon them—to send it flying in harmless fragments through space ? Only one thing, only one course was visible to the experienced eye of this most experienced expert.

Long—how long it seemed to him, looking back !—he had combated such difficulties ; he had either been able to stop the growth of the weight of evidence against himself and his confederates, or to divert it from his own to some innocent shoulders.

But now he could not see his way to escape. This boy, who had arisen like the young David, seemed to be under unseen protection. Every plan of the great confederates concerning him had failed. His destruction could be managed easily enough if he could be got away from the palace ; but, whether by accident or purpose, he was now seemingly watched over and protected by one they could not reach. He was in the lion's den ; but the lion had taken him under his kingly protection.

CHAPTER III.

THE BREAKFAST-ROOM OF A KING.

‘Most dread liege,
The good I stand on is my truth and honesty ;
If they shall fail, I, with mine enemies,
Will triumph o’er my person ; which I weigh not,
Being of those virtues vacant. I fear nothing
What can be said against me.’

King Henry VIII.

A SMALL room, furnished simply, though elegantly ; a round table in the centre with a few breakfast dishes ; a basket of fruit, and some hothouse flowers, and covers laid for two. This is the breakfast-room of a monarch, and the simple meal is waiting for the King.

An old man with a kind though sad face enters, followed by two attendants. The old man has bright eyes, gray hair, heavy moustache, and a genial countenance.

Underneath the rich *robe de chambre* he wears you perceive he is dressed for riding, and in your mind you recall a kingly personage you have seen mounted on the well-known charger with which he is identified by the subjects of his capital.

Now his Majesty comes into the room, takes his place at the table and opens letter after letter.

These are from his children, his friends and relations. Over one he pauses. It contains a photograph of a woman dear to all who know her, the sole daughter of his house and heart, his absent child. Long he looks at it, kisses it, sighs, and puts it back into its envelope. The letters read, his Majesty next takes up the *Times* newspaper, which is laid regularly on his breakfast-table. This he glances over, and then pushes his correspondence aside and addresses an attendant.

‘Let the Princess know breakfast is served.’

‘Yes, Majesty,’ the man says, and opens a door.

The Princess immediately enters, followed by Marta. She goes to the Czar, kneels, and kisses his hand.

Marta stands behind the chair where her mistress will sit presently.

The King places his hand upon the golden head bowed before him.

‘Good-morning, sweet lady,’ he says. ‘How fares the boy, and why is he not to come to my breakfast-table to-day?’

Again kissing the hand she still held, the Princess rises and seats herself at table.

‘Majesty,’ she said in French, ‘I am in great trouble. I have asked for this opportunity that I may tell you.’

Here she looked at the two attendants, who were immediately dismissed.

‘A crisis has arrived in my life. I must act with promptness and decision. To you, my best friend on earth, I come for advice. I ventured to intercept your Majesty’s most kind invitation to my son, whom I have left secreted in my apartment.’

‘Secreted? What has the boy done?’

‘Nothing, sire; nothing but his duty as your most loyal subject and the son of your Majesty’s best friends. It is the old story, sire. He has possessed himself of facts proving beyond doubt grievous injustice to some of your Majesty’s most innocent, most oppressed subjects. He is a dangerous man, this youth; for well they know that, through me, he can reach your Majesty’s ear. They seek to destroy him. They will succeed. One after another—father, husband, friends—they have murdered or banished; and they will kill my boy. Look at me, sire! See how worn I am with wakefulness and dreadful anxiety. All the long night I have watched and worked to defeat the plot they have laid to get my boy out of the palace before he could have the opportunity of speaking to your Majesty of what they know he has discovered. May I tell all? May I once more beg your fatherly attention to a tale as dark, as foul and fiendish as anything ever told before?’

‘This is the veriest insanity, my child,’ the Emperor said. ‘Nothing can reach you or yours so long as you are under my protection. You are excited now; let us speak of this again’.

‘Majesty!’ the Princess said, rising and kneeling to the King, ‘I beg, I implore you to hear me now. You think you can save me and my son. Sire, my husband, your Majesty’s life-long friend, was he not under your royal protection? And, when he stood in their way, did they not murder him? Sire, you promised him, when with his last breath he begged your friendship for me and my child, you promised him what he asked. And I, child though I was, I promised too, to obey you in all things, to stand by you under all circumstances, to make

which is dearer to me than either, my fair fame, is gone.' .

'What!' the Czar said, starting up, 'have they dared to insinuate——?'

'Insinuate!' the Princess said, whilst her pale face flushed crimson. 'Insinuate! They have insulted me openly. No one in the palace believes me, what you, sire, know me to be, innocent and honest. And I have kept these wicked slanders to myself, for I knew their object to be to drive me from your Majesty.'

The Czar took her hand and led her to a sofa. His Majesty was pale, and there had come into his face a stern, hard expression.

'Now, Princess,' he said, 'tell me your story. You should have told me of this before.'

'Sire, I have a pitiable story to tell. I have gone over it in my own mind, until I can tell you, in a few words, that which, unstudied, would have taken me hours to relate. Sire, when my boy left Petersburg last summer, he went, as you know, to Britzka, in Poland, where his regiment remained some months. Whilst there, certain cruel and oppressive treatment of the humble and un-offending subjects of your Majesty was brought to his notice. He determined to punish the offending officials,

when, to his astonishment, he learnt that they but obeyed the orders of their superiors. He went on higher and higher, seeking the source of such iniquitous instructions, at every step hearing your Majesty made responsible for the grossest tyranny, until he had gathered proof, strong and undeniable, of the guilt of the entire official body which exists between your Majesty's subjects and yourself. Suddenly my son received orders to report at Petersburg on the 15th. Your Majesty will remember it was not your intention to return here before next month, and the plans were changed only a few hours before we started for the capital.

'Your Majesty's unexpected arrival produced great consternation, and it required all the machinery at hand to meet the emergency; for my son was on his way here, and their only hope of preventing a catastrophe was that he might be sent on other duty immediately upon his arrival, without giving him a chance of communicating with me. As soon as I became aware of their intentions, I despatched a note by courier, urging him to push forward and gain a day if possible, and to come at once here to the palace. This he did, and to their dismay arrived last night. After dining with your Majesty, I went to his apartments, saw and made him comfortable. It was my intention to let him report, as instructed, at headquarters to-day; and if he received orders to leave for foreign or distant service—as I felt assured he would—then to petition your Majesty to accept his resignation, and to allow him to return to his estates in Hungary.

'But, Majesty, there are rings within rings in this palace, and one of these circles is under my command. I had reason to believe mischief was intended to the boy,

and something. I saw on Horritoff's face confirmed my suspicions. And before midnight I learnt that my son was to receive imperative orders to depart at daybreak in command of a dangerous expedition, taking him beyond the reach of your Majesty and myself, and perhaps sealing his lips for ever.

'I defeated their plan by making it impossible to deliver this order. I brought my boy through the chapel to my own apartments in the dead of night. I gave him my own bedroom, and I determined that I would guard the door with my own arm before they should reach him, until I had been able to place this matter in your Majesty's hands.

'But even to my apartment they followed him. My poor woman Kolmere was pressed into the service of the enemy by threats of disclosing and punishing her already ruined husband. They have robbed and disgraced him, poor man, and he is in hiding, fearing the worst.

'Sire, I have told you the skeleton of my tale. My son, Madame Kolmere, and her young husband, who is another victim of the conspirators, hundreds—thousands of your Majesty's poor crushed subjects, are ready to clothe my bare facts with most distressing details.'

From time to time, as the Princess spoke, the Czar started up as if to end the interview; but as she went on his expression changed from impatience to anger, and when she had finished he was pale, and his eyes flashed and his lips trembled, as he said:

'Princess, you would not make these accusations against men high in office without proof to substantiate your words. Without such proof, nothing could be

done. Bring your son to me after breakfast, and let me hear his story. Until then, leave me. I will, I swear to you, sift this matter to the bottom; and if I still have power, I will punish the guilty. Adieu, *ma chère*. Princess, believe me, what you have suffered for me and my sake shall not go unrewarded, if there be reward for such friendship.'

A tender look was in the old man's eyes as he kissed the soft white hand and led her to the door.

The Princess thanked his Majesty with tears of gratitude in her eyes, and was gone; Marta, who had stood like a statue during the entire interview, following silently. The Czar drank a cup of coffee and retired to an inner room, but only to return, bearing in his hand a small casket. From this he took a packet of letters, and hastily selecting one, read it:

'There can be no reason why your Highness should not marry, providing your Highness break no orthodox laws of consanguinity, as there can be no question concerning succession involved in such a marriage,' etc., etc.

'So!' his Majesty said, as he folded up the papers and locked them in the cabinet. 'This will be a pill for them, but they have prepared it for themselves. Ha! ha!' he laughed; 'it will be a treat to see old Horritoff's face when it is announced.'

He rang the bell, and when the attendants appeared, his Majesty hastily finished his breakfast. Then he retired to the inner apartment, and when he returned half an hour later he wore the undress uniform in which he usually appeared in the streets of Petersburg.

'I will receive the Princess O—— and her son, the Prince Loris, in the blue *salon*,' he said to one in

attendance, who retired; and during the ten minutes which elapsed before the appearance of the visitors, the Czar paced up and down the breakfast-room, his face lighted up with an expression of pleasure seen there seldom now.

The door of an inner room was heard to open and close, and his Majesty, after standing for a moment as if to gain time or courage, lifted the curtain and entered a small but exquisitely furnished *salon*.

The Princess and her son stood near a marble chimney of delicate design and beautiful carving.

Her Highness had changed the rich morning robe for a dark blue tight-fitting velvet gown buttoned at the throat with two magnificent diamonds; rich dark sable bands bordered the skirt and trimmed the body of the dress, and made a beautiful setting for the white throat and the golden head.

Prince Loris came forward, bent on his knee, and kissed the hand of his sovereign.

'I am glad to see you, Prince,' the Czar said, raising the young man. And then he added, addressing the Princess: 'How like his father he has grown!' His Majesty seated himself, and pointing to a chair beside him invited the Princess to sit, and continued: 'Now, Prince, I hear from your mother that you have a communication to make to me. Your mother has prepared me for it. Just tell me what you have discovered, and your proofs, if they should be required, of the truthfulness of your observation.'

'Sire,' the young man said, 'I will be as brief and concise as possible, and for every word I speak I shall, when your Majesty requires them, produce proof clear and

positive. A circumstance, trifling in itself, brought before me the knowledge that certain of your Majesty's subjects were greatly and wantonly oppressed. Whilst investigating these cases, as I thought it my duty to do in the service of your Majesty, I became aware that I was jealously watched by the civil authorities, and that by my action in the cause of the weak and innocent I was gaining the animosity of the manager of the civil departments. I was also warned by anonymous correspondents that I was walking in dangerous paths, and that the fate awaited me which had always overtaken mischievous niddlers. Knowing the great importance of proof positive of any discovery I might make, I looked for a special case which I might take up and sift to the very bottom. I was not long in finding one. Accident made me acquainted with the family of a Polish noble, one of the very highest and oldest and noblest in that unhappy land. That the head of the family was in exile was not an exception to the rule. There is scarcely a Polish noble of representative family who has not been banished, especially if he be moderate in politics and inclined toward reconciliation. I found that the family of this gentleman had been robbed year after year by highwaymen wearing your Majesty's uniform. I was present, disguised as a common soldier, when the Château, the home of this family, was violated by what was termed a search-party. A high official, supported by soldiers, professedly looking for documents, really there to harass the family so that a bribe would be paid them to retire, and rid the poor people of a loathsome presence. I was present, as I tell your Majesty, in disguise. I saw men, officials in your Majesty's service, and purporting

to be obeying your Majesty's orders, so disgrace their name and their country, that I blush to tell the story. I saw them barter with the mother, the lady of the fallen house, for the last valuable she had left as the price of leaving her in peace. I saw them empty her small purse. I saw her treated savagely, brutally, and her house disgraced by their presence. Sire, a few days before this, I saw her child, a young daughter, accompanied by a faithful servant, hide in the earth a few family souvenirs, to save them from these rapacious monsters.'

'And the husband and father in exile, the son proclaimed,' the Princess added.

'Majesty,' Loris continued, 'the father is in exile for no crime against your Highness. I have proof that, from the moment of his return to Poland after the death of his father, he preached a doctrine of reconciliation—that, the night before his arrest and banishment, he addressed his people and recommended a policy of moderation. Nay, sire, I have the very documents signed by the Count, and found upon his person and in his house after the arrest, not one of which (and I have them all duly initialled and scheduled) breathes one word of evidence against him. On the contrary, the gentleman deserved well of your Majesty for the fearless manner with which he tried to preserve law and order. Of what I say I have proof, upon which, your Majesty being the judge, I will stand or fall. This is a typical case, sire, one representing the condition of a whole country.'

'Oh, this is monstrous!' the Czar said, rising and walking up and down the room. 'I believe every word of it. It but corroborates much that has reached us. What is the name of this sorely distressed family you speak of?'

'Stetzki, sire—Count Michael Stetzki.'

'Of what does his family consist?'

'His Countess, Majesty, and a son and a—daughter.'

The young man's eyes fell beneath the sharp gaze of the Czar, who turned to the Princess.

'You mentioned some one—the husband of one of your women, I think—who had a similar story to tell. Can he be produced?'

'Yes, Majesty,' the Princess said. 'I have sent for the young man. I bade him seek the protection of the guard here at the palace. He is, I hope and trust, there now. May I go for him? Will your Majesty hear him?'

'I will certainly hear him; but Prince Loris will go and do your errand. I wish to speak to you alone.'

'Loris,' the Princess said, scarcely heeding the Czar's request, 'go to Marta, and tell her to bring Madame Kolmere and her husband here to the presence of his Highness. Fly, dear, do not lose a moment; and ah, my boy, be careful! Linger nowhere; these people are made desperate in their fear of discovery and by their thwarted plans.'

'Be assured, little mother,' the young man said, kissing her hand, 'nothing can harm me here.'

He saluted the Emperor and departed.

Scarcely had the door closed when the Czar approached the Princess:

'My friend,' he said, taking her hand, 'what you have told me this morning hastens only by a few days something I have to ask you—a proposal which, but for your sweet sake, I should have made long ago. The disclosures made by your son are only repetitions of what I already know. I am surrounded by a network of treason-

felony. I have tried to break through and escape many times, but in vain. I shall now exercise my utmost authority. It will be a war to the death between the Bureau and the Throne. If I am forced to extreme measures, I will appeal to my people for strength to slay the many-headed monster; and if that step should be necessary, we should plunge our capital in civil war, and drench our streets with blood. Under these circumstances I feel that it would be unfair to ask you to share so uncertain a fate as mine, but it is the only way to put a stop to slanderous tongues; and if you will accept this poor hand which, with all my heart's best affection, I offer, and with it the protection my name yet affords, you will make me happier than I ever hoped to be again on this earth.'

The Princess knelt to her lord. She reverently kissed the brave old hand which clasped hers, and as she lifted her blue eyes to his face • •

'Sire,' she said, 'my allegiance you have always had; my love, honour, and obedience I give you wholly and entirely. God bless your Majesty, and make me all your great heart may desire! I would retire now,' she said, hastily rising as she heard the noise of many feet in the antechamber.

'Nay, my beautiful Princess, my beloved, remain! It is a trial; but more severe ones may await us both, and your presence is necessary here. I was wrong to take so inopportune a moment for my declaration; but after I determined this morning to take the step without delay, I could scarcely restrain my impatience till I heard your answer.'

His Majesty retired to the inner room, and the door

opened and admitted Prince Loris, Madame Kolmere, and a young, fair, pale man, who looked ill and weary.

As they passed into the room Marta's tall form was seen bringing up the rear. She slipped quietly in, and when the stranger of the party turned to close the door, he saw her standing beside it as motionless as a statue.

Thus the faithful creature sought to shield her mistress from the charge of being found alone with the Czar. For the fifteen long and eventful years of the Princess's attendance upon his Majesty, it was known by those who did not divert the straight channel of truth, that Madame O—— had never been seen in his Majesty's presence unattended. This fact did not shield her from the evil tongues of malicious enemies; but it preserved the respect of her friends.

The party had been some time with Madame the Princess before the return of the Czar.

As his Majesty entered the room, Madame Kolmere went hurriedly forward and dropped upon her knees; whilst the two young men and the Princess stood close together, forming a picturesque group. After salutations were over, the Czar addressed the young woman graciously, raising her as he did so:

'You have a petition to make, madame; and you have to thank the Princess O—— for this audience. Speak, my child.'

'Not for myself, sire. I have the friendship of my mistress, her sympathy and protection. I want no more; but my husband, sire, for him I crave your gracious ear. He is ill, father; look at him. He has been hunted down by false accusations, robbed of his appointments,

disgraced, and now they seek to destroy him. Speak to him, sire ; let him tell his story.'

'What need?' the Monarch replied. 'It is a story often told now. It is hard to believe, hard to doubt. To what test are you willing to submit, young man, to show your loyalty?'

'Anything your gracious Majesty may choose to impose. My father served his King and his country well ; I am no less loyal than he.'

'Who was your father?' the Czar asked.

'A brave soldier, Majesty, who fought for his country and fell on the field of Alma.'

'What!' the Czar said, starting, 'the son of General Kolmere?'

'The same, sire.'

The Monarch walked to the window, and stood a few moments in profound thought. Then he rang a bell on the table beside which he had sat. His aide-de camp appeared instantly.

'This gentleman,' his Majesty said, addressing the aide-de-camp, and placing his hand upon the shoulder of young Kolmere, 'will remain in the palace till further orders. Tell the Chamberlain to give him careful tending ; he is ill. Madame Kolmere,' he continued, 'you will, I am sure, see these orders carried out.'

In profound gratitude the young couple kissed the hand of their friend and father, and withdrew.

The Czar then turned to Loris, who stood beside his mother, and held out his hand, which the young man took and kissed according to Russian custom.

'Loris O——,' his Majesty said, 'your story and that of your *protégés*, these poor Poles, shall have my most

earnest attention. Your mother has obtained for your friend Stetzki a full pardon, and has already despatched a friend to his aid. I will bring him, with his family, here, and myself hear and investigate the charges made against him. I am prepared to believe what you tell me, and henceforth whatever touches your own happiness (and I think this family are more than ordinary acquaintances to you) must affect ourselves; for your mother has to-day accepted my hand in betrothment, and has agreed to share a life she has long brightened.'

The young man looked with amazement from one to the other. Then, seeing that his silence was misunderstood by his mother, and forgetting all else, he sprang forward and took the slight form in his arms and kissed her on either cheek. Then, remembering in whose presence he stood, he took the hand of the Princess and placed it in that of his King.

'Thank you,' the Monarch said, almost humbly. 'Thank you, Loris my son! Now,' he said, 'I must leave you. I have given myself a pleasant morning; I must now to work. There is an assemblage of high officials here this afternoon at three o'clock, at which I must be present, for I have an important announcement to make; and I shall ask that you, Loris, be transferred to my body-guard. Pas adieu—au revoir. I shall expect both of you to dine with me to-night.'

Waiting for neither thanks nor adieu in return, the Czar withdrew.

'Mother,' Loris said, as the door closed behind his Majesty, 'Mother darling, I can scarcely believe this to be real. It seems like a fairy-tale, where everyone is married and lives happily ever afterwards. Yesterday I

entered the fairy palace ; I was borne down with anxiety and grief ; I knew not what was to be my fate.* I trembled for those I had left behind in the power of their enemies, whose first object would be to destroy them, as strong proof against the great conspiracy. To-day I find the greatest wishes of my heart about to be fulfilled—my friends in safety, their enemies in confusion. But for Strakosch's perfidy I should be happy ; but the more I think on that, the blacker his crime seems. How can he live, knowing that sooner or later I must find out his baseness ?

‘ My son, his guilt is black, and his is the unpardonable sin ; but God knows what terrible necessity is urging him on. Think of the situation of Madame Kolmerc this time yesterday—her husband hiding from what she believed certain death, his secret in possession of that arch-fiend Horritoff. Body and soul he had that woman in his power. If she refused to do his bidding, he had but to put the screw on and torture her into obedience. You cannot know, dear boy, what it is to suffer such agony as that poor woman has endured, before she could bring her mind to do the wretch's bidding ; but you saw the young husband, bowed down with the weight of his terrible situation. The poor fellow seemed to have lost all courage, all manliness ; yet I know him to have been a brave, fine soldierly young man. Oh, my son, it is a terrible system this we live under ! I never feel assured ; I always act upon the first instant of advantage, otherwise they would defeat me. Now, though you naturally feel strong in his Majesty's support, I beg you not to lose a moment, to allow of no delay, but to bring your friends here at once. Marry the girl you love, and depart to

your Hungarian estates. With Count Stetzki's pardon, he will receive back his property, of which he has been robbed. Let him leave a business man to recover possession of his estate, and let him take his family away out of the unhappy influences.'

The Princess spoke rapidly and excitedly, and there was an appeal and urgency in her voice.

'Whatever your wishes are, my mother, they shall be obeyed. I owe to you everything of happiness I possess, or hope to possess, in this world. Now, mother darling, I will conduct you to your own apartment, and I have just time to reach headquarters and report before two o'clock.'

'But that, my son, is not now necessary. His Majesty——'

'Promised, my little mother, to ask that I be transferred to his Majesty's body-guard. My duty until that is arranged is obedience to my commanding officer.'

As the young man spoke, mother and son left the royal apartment, and a few moments later Loris O—— rode out of the palace gate.

CHAPTER IV.

FOUR LOAVES OF BLACK BREAD.

‘Do you find patience so predominant in your nature
That you can let this go? Are you so gospelled
To pray for this good man and for his issue,
Whose heavy hand hath bowed you to the grave,
And beggared yours for ever?’

Macbeth.

A COLD, blustering March day, and the streets of Petersburg, as usual at this season of the year, nearly impassable. The light snow which fell early in the morning has been blown about all day by fierce gusts of wind, which increased steadily in force, until at nightfall there was a perfect hurricane.

It was difficult to keep one's feet against this cold blast, and one's eyes were blinded for the time by the drifting snow, the light, hard particles of which, after beating against the face till they penetrated the skin, formed little banks on coat and collar, or were whirled about by the eddying wind till they found rest in some more sheltered place, where they immediately formed banks and fortifications against all travellers that came their way.

The streets were nearly deserted; there was not a sleigh to be seen, or a sleigh-bell to be heard, and no

human being was visible, except now and then the patrol, who, with bent head and muffled form, breasted the blast, and made what way he could from one post to another.

In a very narrow street, with high dark buildings on either side, the shutters and doors of which were closed, and from which came no sign of life, either from within or without, a figure suddenly started forth as if sprung from the pavement. She had appeared immediately after a patrol had passed, she was not there when a few seconds before he had turned and surveyed the street—a woman, cloaked and hooded, and battling with the storm, against which she made slow progress. She seemed to be following the footsteps and the example of the patrol who had just preceded her. Like him, she clung closely to the wall of the buildings she passed; and, like him, she occasionally stopped and looked up and down the deserted streets. The woman had not only the storm to contend with; she seemed heavily laden by some burthen under her cloak, which added greatly to the breadth of her body.

On she struggled, nearly standing still when the blast was fiercest, but quickening her pace as it blew past and left a lull.

Somewhere behind the snow-laden clouds there was a moon, and the woman seemed careful to keep on the side of the way which was most in shadow.

At last she reached the end of the narrow street, and looking hastily around, turned suddenly, and mounting the few steps before the door of a large building, evidently a warehouse, knocked twice.

A slight sound from the window near, a little panel is drawn back, and almost immediately the door is

opened, the woman admitted, and then closed and barred.

A man grasps her hand, and they begin to ascend the staircase in silence and in darkness. Up, up, over two flights, then through great empty rooms, up again, and then they stop at a door and give a signal.

The door is opened, and the pair enter a room occupied by six men at a work-table, lighted by six candles in safety-frames. There seems to be no window, except a small sash in the roof. The room is long and low, with slanting sides, and, except by the work-table and the rough seats occupied by the six men, unfurnished.

No one spoke as the woman and her guide entered; but all looked up as she took from under her cloak some pieces of rope, with which her burthen was evidently fastened to her body. Then the cloak itself was removed, and there around her waist were strung four loaves of black bread. Of these her late guide assisted to relieve her; and very heavy they seemed, for the man's hands bent under their weight, and they came down upon the table with a solid thud.

Relieved of her burthen, the woman took up her cloak and passed to another room.

After her departure, one of the workmen seized a loaf of bread and began tapping it with a hammer, and as he did so a thick crust fell off and disclosed a round ball painted white. This ball opened, and from it the man produced a smaller ball, also white.

These he carefully examined, and then passed on to his companions, who paused in their work to inspect the curious contrivances. Not a word was spoken; but as the man stripped the bread from the balls a look of

satisfaction passed from one to another. These men were variously employed in the preparation of chemicals, and it soon became evident that the shells had been brought here to be charged.

After working for some hours steadily and silently, one, who appeared to be the master, gave a signal, and the men all rose up, and taking from under the tables various *débris* of their late work—broken glass, empty jars, zinc boxes, bits and bundles of cotton and waste—all were gathered up and carried with great caution to a cupboard in a remote corner of the room. Then the men, one and all taking their candles, retired to the room which some time before the woman had entered.

This room presented a curious appearance. When the door closed upon them, all evidence of its existence disappeared. It shut into padded casements, with which it was also covered; not a door or window was visible except a skylight, from which hung a ladder. The room was heated to suffocation by a huge iron stove on which boiled and bubbled a pot, evidently containing supper for the men. Near this, stretched upon straw, lay half dressed a black-browed young man.

The woman we have seen before stood at a large table in the centre of the room, preparing food by the light of an oil-lamp, which emitted a sulphurous smell, and added to the fetid air of the place.

The face of the woman, seen by the strong light, was too horrible for description. One side of her face, in which the eye had been extinguished, was drawn out of all resemblance to anything human. Her head was to all appearance hairless, under a black cap or handkerchief worn across the forehead and tied at the back,

showing great scars which began in the neck and disappeared under the head-dress. The remaining eye was black and piercing, but there was no sign of lash or brow, and the nose had shared in the general wreck of her features; only the mouth was left untouched by aught save time, and a bitter experience had drawn the lips together in a manner expressive of determination and cruelty. She stood at the table cutting black bread, the yellow light of the lamp flaring up in her face, a picture of horror.

As the men came in, they spoke to her, and when she answered, returning the 'God be with thee,' her voice was soft and sweet, a startling contradiction to her terrible face.

'Hast thou brought the paper?' the young man asked, who seemed to be the leader.

'Yes.'

And she produced a crumpled sheet from the folds of her skirt. He took it, and as he unfolded it, the other men drew up to the table and began eating the black bread and some dried meat.

'Read to us, Peter Borovitz,' the woman said. 'Nadine told me the police had captured Orloff and Tanski, but could find no evidence against them.'

'All the same, poor Orloff and Tanski will never leave their clutches. But what does it matter? Sooner or later their fate awaits us all. It is far better to die either with the success or the failure of our attempt. They shall never take me alive.'

This was said by a pale youth not yet twenty, who spoke the Russian of the Baltic provinces with a German accent.

‘ Here is more police romancing. Listen !’

And he who had received the newspaper from the hand of the woman read :

‘ “ It is well known from what source this infamous organization ” (that’s us) “ derives the means to carry out their nefarious plots. All countries have enemies ; but Russia is especially an object of hatred to those who look with jealousy upon her progress, with envy upon her prosperity, and with all uncharitableness upon institutions they dare not copy—institutions which give freedom to her subjects, and peace and concord to her entire people. Yet though Russia is an object of the jealousy of other nations, it is to no other country that Russia is indebted for the plague of Nihilism. It is to an element within her own dominions—an element in the country, but not of it ; an element invisible but malignant, permeating our whole social system, sapping the foundations of our national structure, and encouraging anything likely to produce confusion and anarchy ; for it is upon the victims of confusion and revolution these birds of prey live.” ’

The reader paused and looked around. The young man at the fire had awakened—was sitting up, rubbing his eyes. The woman stood with the knife she had been using grasped in her hand. The men at the table were eating, but also listening attentively until the reader had finished the last sentence. Then all turned to the direction of the stove-side, to the newly-awakened sleeper. Room was made for him at the table. The woman took his hand and led him forward. He was evidently the honoured guest. The best they had was but the coarsest, but the best was for this young man with beetling brows.

When he had been seated at the table and his plate supplied with food and his cup with drink, and when all had said some kind word or made inquiry as to his health and feelings, he asked Peter Borovitz what he had been reading.

‘Only some great discoveries made by the wisdom of the nation, expressed through Michael Nollikoff of the *North Star*. It is at last discovered that our *great organization* derives its means of carrying on the nefarious plots from a certain source, and I had just come to this secret, which the *North Star* gives us for a copeck. And where do you think the money comes from?’

‘The Pope of Rome?’

‘No; that theory is exploded, and the Catholics are acquitted. No; Michael Nollikoff names the next best hated people of the nation.’

‘Who?’

‘The Jews.’

‘Nonsense!’

‘But let me read it to you. Let me see: where was I? “Element invisible, but malignant . . . confusion.” Oh yes! here I am. “For it is upon the victims of confusion and revolution these birds of prey live. I mean the Jews.”’

‘Does Nollikoff believe this?’

‘Nollikoff believes anything he is officially told to believe, and, if he did not, he would not venture to publicly differ with the powers that be. But I cannot quite see what this new move means. What do Horritoff and his scorpions hope to gain by turning the animosity of the people against the Jews? What will they gain?’

‘Plunder!’

It was the woman who spoke.

‘No,’ said a pale young man, who had hitherto made his presence evident only by a terrible cough—‘no, I do not think that. I believe Horritoff and his family hate the Jews as they hate the Catholics, the only two bodies in Russia who belong to a universal family, to whom they can appeal, and who will not silently allow these, their Russian children, to be devoured by Russian wolves. They cry out, these people, when they are hurt, and their friends hear them. Their voices reach Rome and the million of those who claim Rome as their spiritual head. These voices make a great noise, and the Czar would be very deaf not to hear them. And then the Jews are nearly as uncomfortable to deal with—their rich English, German, and even American brothers, a family controlling the finances of the world. These all protect morally their Russian friends—aye, and give most tangible evidence of their protection and affection. I can understand Horritoff’s move here; but what I can never understand is the constant and repeated assertion of the police that we are a great and powerful organization, moving in silent, invisible circles, impossible to suppress because of our numbers and of our vast influence. This move of the great players does us infinite good, but I confess I do not understand the game.’

‘It is all the better for us,’ the woman said, ‘that they believe it.’

‘Yes, little mother, if they did believe it, or one word of it. How absurd to think the great centre of the secret system should believe anything so perfectly untrue, when

every meeting we hold, aye, every word we utter, is known to them within twenty-four hours !'

'I hope this one and its object may be an exception,' the young man who had been asleep said ; and there was a look of pity in the eyes of all as one took his hand, and answered :

'Whatever happens to you, brother, we share your fate. If we succeed, we die with you ; if we fail, we will seek safety together. For our lives belong to the weak and the helpless, to our brothers in misfortune, to our country, and we must preserve these lives for renewed labour in our cause should we fail now.'

'You are the luckiest of all, honoured by the fates, and I fear you will not give up your good fortune, resign your privilege.' It was the pale consumptive with the racking cough who spoke, and as he did so he laid his hand upon that of the youth who had last joined the group at the table. 'But, brother, you are young and strong ; your life is useful to your country and to our cause. I am a broken reed ; under any circumstances I shall go on only a short time longer. Brother, let me take your place !'

'Tempt not thy brother to sell his heritage, Ivan Borovitz,' the woman said, raising her hand and speaking like a prophetess. 'He has a great work given him, and he will do it. That which has fallen to him will be crowned with success. And thou, too, Ivan Borovitz, ill and weak though thou be, much greatness is reserved for thee. Thou shalt not die in the morning. Thy life shall pass through storms and curses out into the clear sky of peace, and thou shalt sink to rest in a glorious sunset, blessed by those who remain. Thou,' she con-

tinued, turning to the dark youth, who, like all the others, seemed deeply impressed by this prophecy—
'thou art born for a great fate—thou art David, going out single-handed to fling thy stone in the face of the enemy ; and thou shalt slay him. Fear not, my son ; thy name shall be great in the memories of thy people. Thou art borne on the wave of our sorrows to victory.'

The woman's voice rose to a high, full tone ; her face and clutched hands worked as if she were suffering agony, and with the last words she sank down in a heap on the floor, and the men gathered around, raised and restored her. She was laid down upon the straw for a while, and the pale young man fanned her with the paper they had been reading. Assured that she—this deformed creature for whom they seemed to feel pity—was safe, the men resumed their places at the table and continued the meal in silence. Then they, one after another, took up their candles, and returned to the outer room, leaving only the young man they had found asleep and the woman.

It was long after midnight when they returned. Again they carried their candles, but this time they extinguished them. Their work was evidently done.

The woman rose up and lighted, after replenishing, the lamp. She prepared coffee while the men washed their hands in a tin bowl, and then all partook of black bread and a hot liquid which the woman poured from an iron pot. Black bread, hard and sour, and coffee made from burnt crusts and maize—this was the breakfast of the central figures in the great Nihilistic organization which existed 'by the support of the vast confraternity of the house of Israel,' and defied the entire force of the Russian Government, with all its powerful machinery.

The boy with the beetling brows again received the greatest attention and consideration from his companions, and the old woman herself muffled his neck with a warm shawl whilst the other men prepared to go out.

When all were ready, the woman, looking, if possible, more ghastly than before, called them around her.

‘Kneel down, children of an unhappy destiny,’ she said, ‘and swear to God and by your hopes of happiness to do your duty! Thou, Peter Borovitz, wilt not forget what thou hast to avenge. Maria Cassilowitch’s true heart is scarcely cold in the loathsome prison-yard where they buried her! And thou, Maurice Kiel, dost thou hear the cries of thy mother—her cries for mercy to the merciless as they hurried thy young brother away to death? Dost see her gray hair all clinging with mud, her torn garments dripping with wet, her bare feet cut and bleeding, as with two hundred others she is bound to the sledges and driven away to that place from which no healthful thing returns? And thou, Roussoff, dost thou want wrongs and memories to strengthen thy arm for the blow? Then think of thy father, murdered without trial; thy home disbanded, thy mother and her little ones driven out! Where are they now—these helpless ones? Dost thou know—thou, my mother’s eldest born? No? Then I will tell thee. I kept it from thee for charity’s sake till now. She, thy poor mother, who never harmed human being—dost thou remember her, with her gentle voice and her kind heart?—she with her little ones pursued by the hungry hounds let loose upon them; robbed of their last rouble as the price of escape! They died of cold on the banks of the Volga! There she was found, with her babes frozen about her—her last

thought, her last care, to wrap them in garments taken from her own poor wasted body! Dost thou want more? Ah! I can go on; and shouldst thy heart quail or thy arm tremble, think of this as thou dost strike the blow—think that by thy hand hundreds—nay, thousands, are saved from the same fate, that thy name shall be blessed in the land! Now go, and God's avenging angels attend thee!

'We may come back to-night,' one low voice said, 'if any are left of us!'

'No; return not here. I will meet thee at the other place. I will have food ready for thee. But oh! do not fail to-day! I feel that this day brings us freedom or death!'

'Perhaps both,' one said.

'Well, perhaps both. Thou speakest well, Roussoff; may thy arm be strengthened, and thy heart lead thee on! Are all prepared?'

For answer, the young man took from his pocket a small ball painted white.

'That,' he said, 'should I drop it here, would land us all in eternity.'

'Thou hast more than one?'

'We each have one. Adieu, mother; pray for me.'

The ladder was fixed against the trap-door, and up this, climbing cautiously, one after another the men disappeared; and when the last had gone the ladder was pulled up and the trap-door shut.

The wind howled without, and devilish passions raged within, and these men went forth about a work as hideous in its sacrilegious nature as that which prompted the sacrifice on Calvary eighteen hundred years ago.

How would their hearts have bled with remorse, could they have known who it was they sought to kill !

A man and a king—aye, every inch a king ! Too high in his great nobility to see the grovelling things that obstructed the way to the hearts of his people—too grand in his nature and his integrity to suspect those who fawned upon him. He looked over their heads, and, looking ever up, failed to see the aim of the assassin at his great heart.

‘They have gone,’ the woman said, as the last sound from the roof ceased. ‘Heaven grant no accident may happen to prevent the fulfilment of their work ! But it must be dangerous and unwise to carry these things with them. Yet I carried mine in the same way. I knew no trembling, no faltering, when I threw the fatal ball, though I knew I should be buried in the ruin I should make. And so I was ; and how still I lay, crushed down by tons of masonry, bleeding, suffering the agony of the damned. I still thought of one thing—had I succeeded—had I killed the tyrant ? The first question I asked, when my mangled body was found ; and my first great pang was when the answer came, ‘He has escaped.’ Then I let them take me away, and restore all that was left of me to life. I would live for one more chance—I would go on for my revenge, and I will go on to the end ! I will fulfil my oath. I swore that dark night, when my beloved died under the lash—died within arm’s-length of my heart—and I was bound, and could not touch his dying lips ! Ah ! how I pledged my soul that night ! And I will keep my word. I will revenge thee, my love—I will—— Who’s there ?’

A sound of trampling feet outside, the door assailed by rude knocks.

The woman looked hastily around the room. There was the basin in which the men had washed their hands, the half-wet towel, and the six rude seats drawn up to the table, the cups with their dark dregs, and the broken bread giving evidence of a repast.

Quick as lightning, she gathered up the crusts, swept the table, and threw the napkin, with its evidence of recently-wiped hands, into the dirty water. The chairs were put back, all but one, and the coffee-cups and mugs disposed about the place. Then she went to the outer room with a candle in her hand, and demanded who disturbed her at this hour of the night.

‘Open the door!’ said a voice. ‘Open in the name of the law!’

‘I will not open the door till I know who calls,’ the woman said.

‘Then we shall break it in.’

‘As you like,’ she answered, hastily examining the room in which she stood.

There seemed no evidence against her there. She retired to the inner room, and a few moments afterwards she heard the door crashing in.

Then entered three men, who came straight to her. She saw they were police, and she smiled grimly as they appeared in all the paraphernalia of their office—uniformed, decorated, and armed to the teeth.

‘Do your work,’ the chief of the party said; and the two men began turning over everything in the room, searching for evidence and material to be used against anyone they might choose to accuse.

Inside and out, cupboards and corners were inspected, and everything found bearing upon the presence of others beside the occupant in possession, brought forward and placed upon the table, the chief standing with drawn sword, and looking as ferocious as if he were commanding the storming of a garrison.

The most damning proofs of the object of some former tenants were brought forward; the screened candlesticks, the zinc boxes, bottles of acids and papers of powders—all arranged on the table.

When nothing more could be found, the officer in command of the party demanded :

‘Where are the men who were recently here?’

‘Men?’ the woman said. ‘I found no men! Only a man.’

‘What do you say? You found no men? What do you mean?’

‘What I say. I came here as servant to a gentleman. He was alone. He gave me a little money, went out one morning, and never came back.’

‘Where did you get these candlesticks?’

‘I found them here. They belonged to my master.’

‘Where did he find *you*?’

‘In the street.’

‘What were you doing?’

‘Do you know what these things are?’ (pointing to the table).

‘I do not know. But my master told me not to touch them—that if by chance some of these things came together, they could blow up the Kremlin, they were so powerful.’

‘Dynamite!’ the officer exclaimed.

‘And gun-cotton!’ said another, following his chief precipitately to the door.

‘And he said furthermore,’ said the woman, ‘that they must never be subjected to the influences of a hot room, or they might go off. So I beg you to take them back to the cooler room.’

But she spoke to silent walls. The three civil officers of the Government, three of the protecting force of the lives and liberties of the citizens of Petersburg, had gone. They would report all that had passed, except the retreat, and soldiers would be despatched for the dangerous combustibles discovered.

CHAPTER V.

INTERCEPTED LETTERS.

OVER the world, far as the eye can reach, there is nothing but snow, dazzlingly white in the mid-day sun that sends down his brilliant rays without heat, and leaves the world at night as cold as he found it in the morning.

Far up above Radna the rocks are clothed in wintry splendour, forming a background from which the dark old battlements stand out like a clear-cut cameo.

All below lies in unbroken, trackless white, over which no living thing moves.

The river, invisible above, runs under its cold white bosom a deep, dark current, kept alive by the warmth it brings from gentler regions, growing less and less as a cold grasp tightens around it, till nothing but a thread-like stream, cold as steel, darts through an icy vein.

At the well the space has grown smaller, and the crystal-covered bucket has grown larger, till there is scarcely room now for the shivering peasant to dip water for his daily wants.

The cattle huddle together, and reluctantly leave their sheltered corners for the food which is hastily thrown them, and the peasant and his family sit all the day long, and sleep the night through, around the smoky fire, their

chief occupation to feed it with logs of wood, their only conversation concerning their food and their daily wants. These people are drifting far away from happier times, when the Castle shed its influence of religion and learning like a radiance over its dependencies. But the Castle is now scarcely happier than the cot, and this, our Castle of Radna, has reached the very limit of its decline.

The autumn and early winter had passed, and the two women had lived on through dreadful anxiety, through cold and, worst of all, the terrible depression born of the isolation and loneliness of their situation. Since the day of Count Stetzki's escape, they had never heard whether he had reached the gipsies and found shelter, or no. Of Casimir's safety they had heard from a courier despatched by the old Affra, but of the father and husband no tidings had reached them; and the snow and extreme cold had come upon them so suddenly, so unexpectedly, at the season, that the Countess feared the worst from its effects upon the delicate and nearly exhausted frame of her beloved husband.

The snow, as we are aware, fell for days after his escape from the Castle, and this the Countess well knew would prevent communication between refugees, and those they had left behind; but when the light crystals had ceased to fall, and the keen frost had made them as smooth and trackless as alabaster, and yet no message reached the prisoners, the brave, loving hearts were crushed, and near broken, and the two lone women sank into a kind of silent despair.

Wanda had, happily for herself, passed a portion of this terrible time in unconsciousness of her misery. She had fallen ill the day of her father and brother's escape,

and for weeks the poor mother struggled for the life of her child, and battled with death, and what seemed worse than death, delirium bordering upon madness. Then, one morning, the girl seemed to herself to awaken from an unrefreshing sleep, and found her mother and Zeka near, with something so strange and unfamiliar in their looks that at first she thought herself dreaming. It was surely her dear mother, but the soft brown hair, still, as Wanda remembered it only yesterday, nearly golden, with threads of silver here and there, was now white, and her calm face and placid smile had been replaced by a look of intensest anxiety. Her blue eyes seemed double their size, and her cheek terribly hollow and pale.

Then Zeka, the little pert, rosy Zeka! this was but her shadow—surely the very suggestion of her former servant, companion, and friend.

For some moments she regarded them unobserved; then her mother caught her anxious expression, came near the bed, took her little hot hand in her cool palm, and looking again scrutinizingly in her face, exclaimed, 'Thank God!' and burst into tears.

Zeka followed her mistress's example, 'and Wanda' found a curious difficulty in asking the question, in a voice not her own, 'What is this, my little mother?'

'You have been very ill, my darling; and now you must keep perfectly quiet, and all will be well.'

A long, slow convalescence, during which the child became aware of a change in the circumstances of the family, where a change for the worse seemed scarcely possible. She gradually took in the surroundings, and her poor heart nearly broke at the thought that she had

been the cause of this distress she saw in her mother's face, for by degrees she came to remember the past, and that terrible night when she witnessed her brother's desperate deed.

Carefully and little by little the Countess told her the story of Casimir's escape; of her father's return to his home, after all those years of exile, a refugee, with the blood-hounds of their bitter and implacable enemies upon his track; of the escape for the second time, and then of the terrible blank when no news came to tell her of his fate.

Then Wanda found that her mother was still ignorant of the dreadful secret with which her own poor heart was burthened, and from Zeka she learnt that the man shot by Casimir was the ruffian who had robbed her mother and torn the souvenir of her lover from her own neck.

The outrage witnessed by her brother was sufficient explanation to the Countess for his rash act, and when Wanda had been carried, in an unconscious state, from the scene of the deed, her mother believed her only overcome with horror at being a witness of so terrible a tragedy.

The serious illness of her child, the danger with which her husband and her son were threatened, overshadowed the minor difficulties of her situation, and the annoyance and inconvenience she otherwise would have experienced at the presence of a large body of soldiers and Government officials who had been sent and had taken up their quarters at the Castle.

Some weeks after Wanda's recovery to the consciousness of her misery, and the terrible dreariness and hopelessness of her surroundings, old Louis brought from the

hamlet near a scrap of news which gave them a ray of light and hope. The gipsy encampment to which the poor Countess had hoped her husband had made his way, had left the neighbourhood unsuspected and unmolested, and had taken a southern course, which, by this time, must have brought them to warmer and safer regions. Of Casimir they had less to fear. He was young and strong, and once beyond the reach of the Russian hounds, he was safe enough ; and the Countess believed implicitly in Affra's judgment, discretion and loyalty, from the marvellous manner in which the old gipsy chieftain had managed the expedition which brought Count Stetzki home to his loving family, though only for a visit of feverish anxiety, so soon to end in flight and renewed wandering.

To the two sad women even this meagre morsel of intelligence was a great boon, and Wanda determined to take advantage of the slight sunshine it had brought the Countess, to unburthen her own heart to her mother. So early one day, when the two prisoners had finished their morning occupations and duties, the daughter told her simple story, leaving out no detail, colouring her own part of the adventure with whatever of blame there was to be attached to either herself or her lover, dwelling on his goodness, kindness, and the nobility of his looks and bearing, ending her narrative calmly, and in the same tone of quiet hopelessness in which she had begun it.

The Countess listened in the profoundest astonishment. Was this story true, or some creation of the imagination impressed during her late mental darkness—unfolded now in her child's unsettled brain? This must be so. No such drama as this could have been enacted under her roof,

under her very eyes, and she remain in perfect ignorance of it all, though it affected the happiness, the reputation, even the life of her child.

Gently she took her daughter's hand, and drew her lovely head down upon her breast.

'This is a hallucination, my darling ; something created in your dear little brain when it was oppressed with fever, and your thoughts were wandering far away from their usual boundaries. But say no more, dearest. Nay. I must be obeyed in this ; we will come back to it some time, if we ever come to look back upon this dreadful experience from happier standpoints ! There, dear, you are already excited.'

But Wanda, having once broken the ice, determined there should be no more secrets between her dear mother and herself. She felt, too, the relief it was to unburthen her heart. She would not allow the possibility of the load being restored, she felt that she could not bear it ; so, tearfully and humbly, she repeated her story, and begged that Zeka might be called, if necessary, to confirm it. But did not her mother remember the incident of the locket ? That contained the portrait of her 'lover !' .

The Countess was shocked, almost paralyzed, beyond thinking. The whole story seemed so fabulous, so terrible, in the consequences to her child, to her entire family. Prince O—— bore the name of a powerful Russian family. His mother was of Hungarian origin—a Court favourite, with whose name rumour had been busy for years. The conduct of the young man, except in the clandestine meetings with her child, seemed to have been highly honourable ; and her beloved daughter's affections were

evidently in his possession. What could come of this but greater trouble to their overburdened hearts? • What was to be the fate of her sweet child? Curiously enough Wanda had kept out of her story that part about the deceit practised upon her concerning the nationality of her lover and her bitter quarrel with him when she discovered him to be Russian; and she was more than surprised that her mother made no special point of his nationality when at last the Countess consented to believe the tale as real, and the subject was reopened. Every other phase of the situation was discussed: the improbability of the Prince O——'s family consenting to his marriage with the daughter of a ruined exile, and, if the family consent were obtained, the impossibility of approaching the Czar on the same subject. And then, as delicately as it was possible, the high-bred woman intimated that there were grave objections to such an alliance on other grounds; that, though she should ever think of her daughter's happiness before all other considerations, yet there was something relating to this connection that might prove an insurmountable objection on the part of the Count Stetzki.

Wanda ventured to ask if this objection was to the nationality of her lover?

'No,' the Countess said; 'no man could help being born; and the selection of his birthplace was a matter equally beyond his control. It would most likely sever many ties with friends and family for a Polish maiden to marry a Russian; but parents had no right to break their children's hearts, and she would give her consent to such a marriage if she were convinced that it would secure her child's happiness, even though she resigned the hope of ever seeing her again.'

'As if my happiness could be secured by excluding my darling from any part of it! No, my own little mother,' Wanda said, putting her arm tenderly around her mother's neck, 'no happiness can come to me in which you have not a share. Your sorrow must be mine. Our home the same. Your country and your friends mine always. I do love him, my dear, kind mother, oh, so well! but, were all difficulties removed to-morrow, I would not leave you in your sorrow for him. No, never, never! And, besides, he may have forgotten all. He may never come back. It is long, long since we parted, and I have had no word, no line; and I never knew why he came not to keep his promise that dreadful night. No, no, my darling mother; I must cease to think of him. I must think only of you, of my dear father, and of my brother, now. My work must be to aid you, to comfort and console.'

Thus the two women discussed the dearest wishes and work of their heart, their hopes and their fears; and nothing happened, and days passed wearily on, until at last, one morning late in February, the Countess heard from one of the officials stationed in the Castle that the officer in command of the Government station of Britzka desired an interview with her, and awaited an appointment. Unused to such consideration, the Countess returned an answer that she would receive the gentleman at his convenience; and was wondering to what change of fortune she was indebted for such courtesy on the part of her enemies, when an elderly man, in the uniform of a guardsman, was announced by old Louis as 'His Exalted Highness Count Peppenhoff.'

The stranger bowed to Countess Stetzka's kind saluta-

tion, and immediately introduced the business which had brought him to Radna.

Last autumn, when an investigation was held upon the body of the man Boraff, a jewelled locket had been found in his possession containing a portrait of the Prince O——, of D——. Notice of this had been given the Prince of O——, who had sent an order that the jewel be conveyed to Radna and given into the hands of Countess Stetzka. He had brought it, and also a letter from the young Prince, which he had the honour to deliver. Hereupon the old gentleman handed the Countess a small packet and sealed letter, and said he would give himself the pleasure of awaiting the Countess's orders—there might be an answer.

The Countess hereupon introduced her daughter, and retired to the window to read her note and examine the packet.

‘Mademoiselle has been ill, I regret to hear,’ the visitor said, looking at Wanda with ill-concealed admiration.

‘Yes; she had been seriously ill, and had greatly added to the trouble and embarrassment of her dear mother in the anxiety and grief of the past months; but she was better now, and should be soon able to go out.’

The gentleman was about to reply, when an exclamation from the Countess caused them both to hastily turn to the window. Wanda saw her mother coming toward her, an open letter in her hand. She never took her eyes off it till she stood before the messenger.

‘Oh,’ she said, ‘this is monstrous! Listen, sir, to this letter; and if you can, I implore of you, explain:

“PETERSBURG, *October 20th.*”

‘October the 20th,’ the Countess repeated, looking up to Wanda, and then turning to the stranger. ‘Oh, sir, listen to this :

“MY DEAR MADAM,

“The bearer of this letter, Colonel Count Otto von Busch, is an old and trusted friend of my own and of my son’s. He has, through his great friendship for me and my family, consented to take to you the enclosed letter from my son to your daughter, and also my letter to yourself. He bears credentials which I feel sure will secure him a welcome ; for——”

‘Pardon me, madame. I must not allow you to proceed without reminding you that I am not Count Otto von Busch, who was prevented fulfilling his mission by a dastardly attack made upon his life by Nihilists at Cracovia. His life was spared, but only after many weeks of the darkness of delirium ; and his despatches, the nature of which was known only to his Majesty, were lost. Count Otto was able to be removed only a few days ago from the hotel to which he was taken after the attempt was made upon his life ; and simultaneously these papers were returned anonymously. He instantly despatched me to you, and communicated with Petersburg. I came late last night to Britzka ; to-day I am here.’

Whilst the Count was telling this most extraordinary story, Countess Stetzka looked from him to her letter, and then back again to the messenger, unable in her bewilderment to connect in her mind the letter she held

in her hand, the incidents just related, and the situation of herself and family.

Neither could Wanda comprehend the agitation of her mother, for she had not seen the letter ; but one sentence had been ringing in her ears ever since her mother had uttered it: 'A trusted friend of my own and of my son's.' Who had thus written? Was it possible they referred to her Loris? The thought sent the poor little heart bounding in her breast, and it was with difficulty she restrained her impatience during the time it took Count Peppenhoff to make the explanation. Now, when she saw her mother evidently bewildered, she rose to her feet, and begged the old gentleman to excuse them whilst they read the letter, which seemed of such importance.

Wanda took her mother's arm and led her to her own little room. Then the two women seated themselves on the low bed, and without a word, but after kissing her child, the Countess again opened and began the letter :

“ TO THE COUNTESS STETZKA.

“ PETERSBURG, *October 20th.*

“ MY DEAR MADAM,

“ The bearer of this letter, Colonel Count Otto von Busch, is an old and trusted friend of my own and my son's. He has, through his great friendship for me and my family, consented to take to you the enclosed letter from my son to your daughter, and also my letter to yourself. He bears credentials which I feel sure will secure him a welcome ; for he takes from the Emperor's hand a full and unqualified pardon to Count Michael Stetzki, your husband.”

Wanda grasped her mother's arm.

‘ Listen, my daughter, listen !

“ ‘Circumstances of a pressing nature, and of great importance to our children, compel me to lay aside all ceremony, and to rush into a matter usually treated with great delicacy and grave consideration ; but in writing to a mother, no less interested in the welfare of her daughter than I am in the happiness of my only child, my beloved son, I feel I need no apology for going at once to the subject of my letter.

“ ‘Count Otto will tell you all you desire to know concerning me and my dear son, and will bear with him my sincere wishes for the safe return of your husband to his family and friends ; and I think, when you have seen and learned all Count Otto has to tell you, you will agree with me that, taking into consideration the troubled times we live in, and the strength of our enemies, it will be wise and safe for you and yours to leave Poland for a time.

“ ‘But, to the main point of my letter. My son loves your beautiful daughter ; and you will forgive the manner in which he made and continued her acquaintance, when I tell you he was secretly investigating causes of dissatisfaction amongst his Majesty’s Polish subjects, and that these investigations have served to bring to light sore grievances ; the direct result of which is the pardon and restoration of your husband to his home, family, and fortune, and the release of many equally guiltless from the clutches of our common enemy.

“ ‘My son was obliged to act with the greatest secrecy and caution. His interest in your family had been reported, and had naturally alarmed those whose safety depends upon keeping buried these dark deeds. But

fortunately nothing considered very serious was charged against him by the secret powers which govern us all, from the Monarch down to the humblest peasant, until the very day upon which he received his orders home, which orders were given in consequence of certain troublesome reports he had thought it his duty to make. Fortunately, as Count Otto will tell you, the Emperor was here when my boy arrived, and the Monarch has still, thank God, the power to protect him. But I feel the greatest anxiety for my son; and the first wish of my heart is to see him married and settled on his estates in Hungary.

“These, with other properties and investments, afford him a princely fortune, which, with his hand and the truest, noblest of hearts, he has offered your daughter, who, he assures me, returns his affection.

“My family—one of the oldest in Hungary—is not, I am sure, unknown to you. I was only daughter and sole heir to my father, Prince —, of Staryi. My husband, whom you will also know by name and reputation, lived and died the intimate and valued friend of the Emperor.

“Loris is my only child, and the joy of my heart.” There is much to say which cannot be said in a letter; but I feel that I have explained and said what is most important, and, I trust, enough to satisfy your motherly anxiety concerning your daughter’s future. I wait your reply with anxiety only less than that of one other.

“My sincere love to your dear child, whom I long to embrace, and with highest consideration, believe me,

“Sincerely yours,

“ELLONA PRINCESS O——.”

The Countess paused, and looked up. Wanda's face was pale as death; but there was a brightness in her sweet eyes—rays of hope not there before—which reflected in her mother's, and both women looked as if the sun had suddenly entered their hearts and lighted up their lives.

'Mother darling,' Wanda said, 'what does it all mean? My father pardoned, my Loris writing through his mother—writing long ago, in October, just after this new trouble came upon us, and before this endlessly dreary winter—writing a letter which comes to us now, months afterwards!'

'And your father's pardon? Where is it? And—where is he, my poor wanderer?'

'We must go back, my mother, to Count Peppenhoff, and ask him what we are to do. Come, my darling. I feel, I know, all will be well.'

'But, Wanda dearest,' the Countess said, 'I cannot see——'

'Never mind, mother dear; come—we will ask.'

The two women found the old gentleman engaged with some ancient and curious book, and, as they entered, he rose and came forward to meet them.

Countess Stetzka asked him in a trembling voice to be seated. He placed them chairs, and then took his seat beside the Countess.

'Count,' said Madame Stetzka, 'we are most grateful to you for your kind service. We do not understand the communication you have brought us. It is a letter of the greatest importance, dated, as you know, last October. Nothing of the kind which could throw the slightest light on the matter has before reached me. I do not know

what to do about this. I should be more than grateful for your advice.'

The Count bowed.

'I should be most happy to serve Madame la Comtesse; but beyond what I have already told you I know nothing.'

'Then, sir, will you read this letter?'

The Count's brow darkened as he glanced over the lines. When he had finished he turned to Wanda.

'Mademoiselle,' he said, 'permit me to congratulate you, and to say that Prince Loris O—— is an enviable man. Madame,' he continued, 'if you will frame a telegram to the Princess, I will at once despatch it. That is the advice you have done me the honour to ask. Write like this.'

He took a pencil and tablets from his pocket, and wrote a few lines, then gave them to the Countess, who read:

<p><i>From</i> COUNTESS STETZKA, Radna, Poland.</p>	<p><i>To</i> THE PRINCESS O——, Palace, Petersburg.</p>
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'Your kind letter of October just received. Nothing accompanies it. Will you advise me? Daughter and self alone here; very anxious.'

Both mother and daughter saw the wisdom of this, and the Count started away with the telegram.

'What manœuvre and intrigue is this?' he said to himself, as he walked down the broad staircase, escorted by old Louis. 'I thought that attack upon Von Busch very curious, and now I strangely suspect foul play, or Busch is a confederate. No, that cannot be. I will

trust him. Well, it must be explained, this, and to the Emperor too, or I mistake the Princess O——. But how is it that she and Prince Loris have been satisfied to await the natural course of things; and never inquire into the cause of delay on the part of their messenger? Ah, I smell reynard here, or my senses are at fault!

So musing, Count Peppenhoff rode away to Britzka, and sent off his despatch; but he directed it not to the Princess, but to a trusty friend, who would, he knew, understand the necessity for caution.

Countess Stetzka and Wanda speculated long and hopelessly on the subject of this enigmatical letter, which had been sent to them nearly five months ago, containing matter of the very first importance, both to the writer and to those to whom it was directed, yet having been allowed to remain unnoticed and unanswered without a question being asked concerning it. And then, what was the meaning of the pardon to which it alluded, when the letter contained nothing of the kind, and Count Peppenhoff seemed to know nothing about it?

All the long day, nearly the long night, the two poor women hoped, despaired, prayed, and waited. Then, at nightfall, on the second day, Wanda's quick eye caught sight, for a moment, of a horseman, who turned into the gateway, and was lost again to sight. In that glimpse she recognised Count Peppenhoff, and flew down the bare cold corridor, and broad stone steps, to meet him.

Yes, there he was, and it was like his German heart to hold up the telegram he had in his hand; but it seemed to the poor girl ages before Louis appeared to open the courtyard gate and admit the horseman.

With the agility of youth the old man sprang to the ground, and was greeted like an old friend.

‘You do wrong, Countess Wanda,’ he said, as he came within speaking distance, ‘you do wrong to come out in this cold; you are still far from well, and you must take care of yourself, for you have much to do.’

He gave the young girl his arm, and led her back to the *salon*, where her mother waited for them; then, after courteous salutations, he handed Countess Stetzka the telegram. She read aloud:

‘From	To
PRINCE O——	COUNT PEPPENHOFF.
Petersburg.	

‘Evidently some grave miscarriage of instructions. I start immediately for Radna.—LORIS O——.’

As the last word left her mother’s lips, a cry of joy escaped Wanda, and in an instant she was sobbing on her mother’s neck; her slight frame trembling like a wind-shaken flower by the intensity of her emotion, her beautiful face hidden by the soft brown hair, which fell in golden waves over her mother’s shoulders.

The Countess led her daughter from the room, kissed her, and leaving her in the hands of Zeka, returned to Count Peppenhoff, who was deeply moved at the scene he had just witnessed.

‘All will be right now, madame,’ he said, taking the Countess by the hand, and leading her to a chair. ‘I know Otto von Busch, and I am entirely convinced of his integrity. I also know Loris O—— and his mother, and there are few people living for whom I have a higher regard. I have sent a long telegram to Von

Busch, and you may depend upon all this intrigue being disentangled. But, madame, you must now help us to find your husband. Any effort on the part of others would but increase the vigilance of those who are aiding in his concealment. I suppose you can help us ?'

'I have the means of communicating with those who can find my husband when it is safe to use such means, but I do not see how that can be until I receive satisfactory proof of his pardon.'

'You are quite right, madame, and such proof must come from Petersburg ; but I beg you to rest tranquilly certain that all will be well. I will leave you now, but post back the moment I have a scrap of intelligence for you. Adieu, madame.'

He went away, and left the Countess in a state of great anxiety and uncertainty of mind, but much comforted by the feeling that at last there was a friend near to help herself and her daughter to unravel the mystery, and, if necessary, to advise them to bear any fresh disappointment that might be in store for them.

But Wanda thought not of disappointment. Loris was coming ! All would be explained. All would be well. And Loris was coming to meet her, not by stealth in the woods, but in her own home, in the presence of her dear mother, as her accepted lover—her *fiancé*. But then came a horrid raven into her soul, croaking doubts. Was he coming to claim her, to stand her friend ; or was he coming to explain the cause of his silence, and was that cause an insurmountable obstacle ? Had he forgiven her ? Did he still love her ? Was he still hers ? She sprang up as this thought crossed her mind, and startled poor little Zeka into an exclamation :

‘Wanda, my mistress, what is it?’

‘Oh, Zeka! I know not what I do; my mind is in such a whirl of anxiety of fear and doubt.’

‘Do you doubt him, Wanda, after the message you have just received?’

‘No, Zeka; I do not doubt his truth. I know he once loved me—but this long silence, and I used him so ill. He may have ceased to love me, all the same determining to see justice done us. It may be for this he comes.’

Zeka’s store of consolation had long ago been exhausted, and all the long evening and until sleep came to rest her anxious heart, the poor young Countess was torn with doubts and fears. But with the early morning came news, joy unspeakable—a messenger from Britzka with a telegram for Wanda. The first missive she had ever received in her life through an official channel. How important it seemed to make the young mistress in the eyes of the little household!

She turned over the curiously-folded missive before opening it. She felt that it contained good news. She lingered over it lovingly, almost caressingly, and might have still gazed for minutes more upon its little paper-seal, but that looking up she caught the anxious expression of her mother’s eyes also directed to the missive she held in her hand. Then she hastily tore it open, and read:

‘B—— B—— Station.

‘First stage of route. Shall be at Radna Thursday night.

‘LORIS.’

Thursday night, and this was Tuesday only! How

desperately far they were from Petersburg! What an age till Thursday! What might not happen in the meantime? But before night the little party had plenty to think of, and the next day and the next brought to them most distressing disclosures. At one o'clock Count Peppenhoff came with orders to those stationed at the Castle to immediately withdraw, and by four o'clock the officer in command had made every arrangement to obey. Before going, this man, a young subaltern, sent in his name, and desired to see the Countess.

He was admitted, and, walking straight to her chair without paying the slightest attention to either Count Peppenhoff or Wanda, he placed in the hands of the Countess a large package, and then, without uttering a syllable, stood at ease before her.

Surprised at this singular pantomime, the Countess looked at the packet, and then observed that there was a paper attached, evidently bearing a list of the contents; but it was unintelligible to her, and she looked from Count Peppenhoff to her daughter, and then again at the packet, and then at the messenger.

'What is your business?' at last asked the Count.

'To deliver the package to her Excellency the Countess Stetzka, and to ask her to sign the receipt delivered with the letters.'

'Oh, I see,' said the Count; 'you are the bearer of despatches to the Countess, and you want a receipt.'

'Countess,' said the old man, 'you must open your packet, and give the messenger a receipt in full. Shall I assist you?'

Before he had finished speaking, the Countess had broken the seals, and as one after the other she took out

the letters, her expression became more and more amazed.

‘This surely,’ she exclaimed at last, ‘is too terrible; these letters are weeks, nay, months, old, addressed to me and to my daughter. Where have they been? Oh, Count Peppenhoff, this is too much! Here is one from my dearest husband, see! postmarked, —, —, October 17th.’

‘Here, look, look! letters from Petersburg, to me, to Wanda. I cannot read them now, I cannot—they may be from the dead!’

The poor woman burst into tears, and hurried from the room.

‘What does this mean?’ asked the Count sternly. ‘When did you get this packet?’

The man, as rigid as a statue, turned mechanically toward the Count and answered:

‘My orders, Excellency, were to keep all letters and despatches till required, or till we were withdrawn from the Castle. Should the letters not have been called for, then they were to be given to the Countess, or the young Countess, or whoever might be authorized to take the Castle upon our retirement!’

‘Ah, I see; these are, then, intercepted letters.’

‘Detained, Excellency.’

‘You must ask your mother to sign the receipt, mademoiselle, and give it to this creature, or we shall have him here all night.’

Wanda left the room, and sought her mother, whom she found buried in the contents of the packet.

For some minutes the Countess took no notice of her daughter’s entrance. She continued turning over the

letters in her hand, reading snatches of those which lay open, and which had evidently been read. Then, as Wanda stood before her, she looked up in blank amazement.

‘My child,’ she said, ‘this seems the crowning trouble and sorrow of my life. To have been so nearly restored to liberty, to happiness, to my beloved husband, to all my soul has longed for during these long, long years; to have the means for all this joy under my own roof, to have it withheld until it is too late! Ah, it is the most terrible torture to bear! God knows how I shall be able to go on through the days that are left me!’

‘Mother, mother!’ Wanda cried, ‘it is not too late. Remember we are not alone now. We have a kind, a powerful friend here to help us, and another one coming. Come, come, we have work to do. Count Peppenhoff wants something done about these papers. Gather them all up, dearest, and come back. That man who brought them is still waiting. Come!’

The Countess submitted to be led from the room like a child. The joy in the girl’s heart had given her strength, and hope led her on.

‘Returning to the *salon*, the list was read over, the receipt given to the officer, and, when he had taken his departure, the three sat down to examine the correspondence.

‘Look!’ the Countess said. ‘Here is a letter from my husband, written the very day after he made his escape from the caves where, with my son, he took refuge, the day upon which he left the Castle. See what this knowledge of his safety would have been had I but had the letters so cruelly withheld!’

The letter was written only a few days after, and described the events already known, of the arrival and concealment of father and son in the caves, of the surprise, and the evacuation of the place of refuge, and of the terrible march through snow and frost, of weariness nigh unto death, and then of rescue.

‘We left the caves, already weary with a long night of preparations,’ Count Stetzki wrote. ‘Casimir took to the ice, and, by the aid of his skates, was soon out of danger, leaving no tracks by which the hounds could trace him. We were less fortunate. Affra determined to push southward towards warmer weather, and we were afraid to seek shelter at any hamlet, lest our numbers should be known, and I discovered. The day was bitterly cold, and the change from the warmer temperature of the caves had told upon me fearfully; and at last my strength completely gave way, and Affra determined to bivouac on the roadside. We had stopped for that purpose, and I had sunk exhausted on the snow, when suddenly a horse’s hoofs were heard, and I was submerged under the camp properties.

‘The horseman approached. It was Zebel, who had arranged everything for my escape, and had secured from good friends a horse. He had also brought food and wine, and, after refreshing my nearly exhausted form with both, I mounted, and, accompanied by the faithful Zebel, made my way to —.

‘There our friends received and concealed me; and then I parted with Zebel, who had to hurry back to release the Cossacks left in the caves. He took back the horse, and the day following joined me at a place ap-

pointed, and from that time to this has never left me. I am safe here, under the protection of another Government. My health is better, and I have every comfort and care provided me by the little colony of refugees who have fled from that land of darkness, ~~Russia~~, and our own poor Poland.

‘But I have great anxiety for you, my beloved, and for our young daughter. Casimir acquainted me with circumstances connected with her that have awakened the very keenest anxiety, and I cannot bear to think what you, my dearest, bravest of women, may be now suffering. I know that my safety, and that of our son, will give you great comfort, and it is all I have to send you. But a little while longer, and I shall send for you and for our child, and I shall know little happiness till I see you. This will be delivered into your hands, or destroyed. If you can send me a message by the bearer, do so; but do not write. I shall not leave this place till I hear from you.’

‘Thank God!’ exclaimed Wanda, as the last words were read from the letter. ‘My father—my dear father is safe, and my brother also. Dear mother, we must bear the rest patiently.’

‘Were safe,’ the Countess said. ‘Remember, dear—I wish I could let you forget—these letters are months old. Here is one from Casimir, written only a few days later. Listen :

‘ “ MY SWEET MOTHER,

“ I am safe. Do not fear for me. I may not return to Radna. Wanda will tell you why. But I am ever thinking of and loving you, and praying for some

ray of happiness to your life. It may not be my happiness to give you this, for I am powerless and an outlaw.

“ Ever your loving son,

“ CASIMIR.”

‘ Then here is a letter from Prince O——. Only a few lines, written long, long ago, saying what his mother has repeated in the letter which you, Count, brought me. Oh, it is terrible, terrible!—the suspense, the cruel waiting of my loved ones for news of us that never came. It is too much; more, I fear, than this poor weary heart can bear.’

‘ Madame,’ Count Peppenhoff said, ‘ be of good cheer. I feel certain all will be well, and that ere many days have passed you will be happily reunited with your dear husband and son. Keep up your courage, and wait patiently the arrival of Prince O——. Believe, in him you have a powerful ally and a true, noble friend.’

Wanda’s heart swelled with joy and pride to hear her lover thus spoken of. She felt the truth of what was said, and, come what would, she believed in him.

The Count took his leave, only to return later in the evening with fresh despatches; and, at the earnest entreaties of the two women, he took up his residence at the Castle to await the arrival of Prince O——, who telegraphed from every stage.

During the two days which intervened between this and the Thursday, both Wanda and the Countess tried to keep their minds and their fingers employed with the preparations for as suitable a reception as it was possible to give the expected and honoured guest within their most limited means; and now at last Thursday had come and the hour was approaching when they might expect him.

The nearest railway station was twenty miles away, and from thence he would ride, horses and attendants having been sent by Count Peppenhoff from the station to meet him.

Wanda, not yet fully recovered from her long illness, gave her mother great anxiety by the extreme pallor of her lovely face and the nervous restlessness with which she became possessed ; and the Countess watched her child with increasing concern as the afternoon went on, until at last, seated at the window which overlooked the approach to the Castle, Wanda implored that she might be left alone.

There she sat, her hands folded before her, gazing over the dazzling snow, spread out till its silver whiteness mingled with the pale blue of the sky at the horizon. One hour, two hours, and no dark speck appeared on the distant track, no horseman came in sight—not a shadow obstructed the cold, glittering view. Would he come, or was there a still harder sorrow and disappointment to bear? If so—if God in His wisdom had decreed that she should drink of the cup of misery to its bitter dregs, she would bow in submission ; but she felt that her heart could not go on! This blow would be the last.

She rose up and left the window, and wearily laid herself down on a couch.

An unaccountable stillness and calmness had taken possession of her. She believed now he for whom her soul longed would not come, and yet she could be quiet and almost peaceful in her deep sorrow. It was difficult to think ; her brain seemed to have become benumbed. Was this despair? Was it death?

So, half consciously questioning herself, she drifted

away to the land of sleep. How long she lay there she knew not, but shadows were in the corners when she started up, and found Zeka standing over her. Without looking toward the door, she felt the presence of others. She turned her head. There, standing within the room, just where the last rays of daylight fell upon them from the great western window—there stood her mother and her lover. As she turned her eyes upon him, he held out his arms, and, with a cry to gladden a lover's ear, she flew to their embrace.

The Countess, whose face was bathed in tears, beckoned to Zeka, and both withdrew.

As the door closed upon them, Loris led his lovely companion back to the couch she had left.

'My own love,' he said, 'did you think I should not come?'

'Oh, Loris! I do not know what I thought. I watched for you till I grew dizzy, sick, and almost benumbed. I do not know how I came to lie down, but I did give you up, and with you all desire to live one hour longer.'

'I was detained, my darling, at the station; and as I approached the Castle and saw you not, my heart misgave me. Now, my own, we part no more so long as life lasts. Never again. Never; never!'

'Then, Loris, I can bear any pain, any sorrow in store for me. I have been ill, dearest, and I am not yet quite my old self; that is the reason, I suppose, I could not continue my watch for you. And I have watched and waited so long.'

'Your mother has told me, dearest, of your illness, and of the fiendish plot, so nearly successful, to part us. Do you know, my love, that a trusty friend was despatched

from Petersburg last October, bearing your father's and your brother's pardon, and instructed to make every arrangement for our marriage? Do you know that he was attacked, nearly killed, robbed, and left for dead in the streets of Cracovia; that, with his first consciousness, he dismissed a courier to my mother and also one to you; that neither reached his destination, but was waylaid, and, upon trumped-up charges, imprisoned; that my messengers, one and all, returned from Radna with the intelligence that you and your mother had fled with your father and brother, and that no trace of either could be found? In every direction I sent scouts. Sometimes I caught glimpses of hope from the news returned, then, like an *ignis-fatuus*, the glimmer would grow fainter and farther away, and would lead me to disappointment. I fully believed I should yet find you, but saw my difficulty. I knew that your father and brother must hide till they knew of their pardon, and I trusted to their getting out of the country when concealment would be no longer necessary. Then a letter poor Von Busch had long before sent Count Peppinhoff fortunately, after wandering about the world for months, reached him at last. He came and delivered it. You know the rest.'

'And my father and Casimir?'

'Are safe, dearest, and now on their way to Petersburg, where we all meet, as soon as the Countess, your mother, and you, my own, can prepare to join them. Where my mother is awaiting the return of her children.'

CHAPTER VI.

THE MIDNIGHT MARRIAGE.

IN one of the many palaces of the Russian Cæsar great preparations had been made for an approaching festivity.

Everything inside the palace had been conducted as quietly as possible, and, as usual, in these late days of the Emperor's reign, all had been done in profound secrecy. But outside the gates everything seemed known, and the richness of the decorations, number of guests' rooms prepared, and of domestic staff engaged, was freely discussed; and a knot of idlers at the palace gates had just been dispersed one afternoon late in February, when a procession of baggage-waggons arrived, followed by a train of servants, and, entering the principal court of the palace, disappeared behind the immediately closed portals.

Later on, covered sleighs drove up, the horses showing signs of travel, and, still later, a single covered vehicle, drawn by two steaming horses, driven by a man enveloped in fur, and either escorted or watched by a mounted guard, which kept at a distance, waited till the sleigh was admitted and the gates shut before they approached and were also received and shut in the palace court. Then all was quiet without, and the gates continued closed till a late hour.

Within there was light, warmth, magnificence. The great hall and staircase was brilliant with hanging lamps, redolent of flowers, which burst into bloom in the genial air, and relieved by their delicate colouring the severity of the white marble pillars and entablature. Servants in gorgeous liveries flew hither and thither; and the rooms, beautiful suites opening one into the other, were marvels of taste and luxury.

In the principal drawing-room the house-party began to assemble, and, as one after another arrived, it became evident that the imperial suite were mustering, and that the royal master was expected; and from scraps and fragments of the conversation it was equally evident that those commanded to attend were ignorant of the cause for which they were summoned.

There were brilliant uniforms, and jewelled decorations, and glittering sword-hilts and clattering spurs; old, distinguished-looking men, holding high office, young aides-de-camp, beautiful women sparkling in diamonds, fair girls dressed with elegant simplicity. All these figures set in a scene of rich draperies, high, gorgeous screens, curiously-carved and inlaid cabinets, richly-upholstered sofas and chairs, drawings and paintings from the best modern artists, choicest flowers in choicest vases. All this with an elegance of adjustment, an artistic arrangement, impossible to describe, but, once seen, not soon forgotten.

The young girl whom we have once before seen in the apartment of Madame Kolmère is standing beside an easel, upon which, draped by an old Moorish banner, is the portrait of a beautiful child.

The young girl is bending over the picture, and does

not hear the approach of an old man, who, passing with faint recognition the other guests assembled, makes his way to her side. She is not aware of his approach till he is beside her, when he speaks, and she starts and turns round.

She laughs, a genuine rippling laugh, as she says :

‘I believe, Prince, you have turned saint—in fact, I am sure you have been sprinkled with holy water, for I never feel your presence now by the pricking of my thumbs ; my Saint Esprit never turns on my neck ; I am never aware of that pervading presence from the vasty depths. What is this that is happening ? What good spirit do you entertain ?’

‘Mademoiselle,’ Horritoff answers, ‘you are so far right ; a spirit has taken entire possession of me—a fair and noble spirit—and I am changed by its influence. May I tell you the name of this spirit—of this good angel ?’

He had the young girl’s hand now, and was leading her to a sofa.

‘Look !’ said one standing near—‘look at Mademoiselle Angélique and the wolf-tamer !’

‘Rather say the weasel-catcher !’ said another.

‘Is it true,’ a third asks, ‘that the old fox is really in love ? Has reynard been caught ?’

‘It is true indeed,’ the lady addressed replies ; ‘and his character seems to have completely changed. He has become silent, and seems indifferent to his old pursuits. He hovers in the shadow of that young girl, though she tortures him with jealousy, laughs in his face at his professions and protestations, sends back his presents, and ridicules and torments him at every opportunity. It is strange—most strange !’

“Parthenia and Ingomar,” said a young attaché. ‘I saw it played in England. Just what you, Countess, are describing. Who are the originals of whom you speak?’

‘There is no resemblance, except between the ladies in fiction and real life,’ the Countess answers. ‘Ingomar was a noble savage; this creature we are discussing is the result of civilization. Ingomar dwelt in the forest, amongst his tribes, over whom he reigned as chief. He fought his enemies openly. This man lives in a palace—’

‘A rat, and ferrets his enemies out of the drains,’ whispered an old woman.

‘I do not quite agree with you there,’ the young man replied. ‘Our weasel only seems to search the drains *after* the rats have gone. But what picture is that they are looking at—that on the easel?’

‘That? Oh! that is the son, when a child, of our hostess. That was Prince Loris at the age of ten.’

At this moment the group was joined by Horritoff, who had been unable longer to detain the lady of his love.

‘Ah! yes,’ he said, joining in the conversation, ‘that is the young Loris, as I remember him—a lovely boy. The Emperor is his godfather, you know!’

The manner in which this was said was inimitable. Not a shadow of a smile or change of countenance indicated that which he meant to convey by this remark; and yet had he added, ‘This is what is given out; but we know of a nearer relationship,’ his meaning could not have been better understood.

‘I also remember the painting of that picture,’ he

continued. 'It cost twenty thousand roubles; but it gave great satisfaction to the Princess. It was done for his Majesty by an English artist, for whom the Princess sent to London.'

'Twenty thousand roubles! Impossible!' an old lady remarked. 'Why, it is a fortune—enough to keep a province from starvation!'

'And as if a Russian artist could not be found good enough to paint the brat!' a huge creature in a toilette of pink, and with a well-grown moustache, exclaimed, but looking furtively around as the words left her lips.

'A Russian was not the author of that beautiful dress you wear, Madame la Comtesse,' Horritoff answered. 'That is the *chef-d'œuvre* of a French artist, I am sure.'

'Ah! of course we go to Paris for our gowns,' the pink mountain replies; and, standing with her back to the door, she does not observe the entrance of the Princess, who has made her way to this very group. 'Of course, we go to Paris for our gowns, because we can get none fit to wear here; but that is very different—'

'To finding fault with others for doing the same,' Horritoff answers severely. 'Madame la Comtesse wants a gown, and not a picture, and goes to another country for it; but is severe upon Madame the Princess for doing the same, though the article required is of much greater importance.'

'Who is severe upon Madame the Princess, that her dear friend, Prince Horritoff, is called upon to defend her?' asks the Princess O——, coming up. 'What is wrong? Are these rooms not beautiful? Is there too much or too little light? What is wrong?'

'Nothing, Princess. All is perfect. Madame la Com-

tesse and myself were discussing and differing upon a question of free-trade. Madame is, I am sorry to inform you (for I know your own views on the subject), a Protectionist, so far, at least, as art-production of one class is concerned.'

'Why do you permit Prince Horritoff to include you, Princess, in this new and dangerous doctrine called free-trade?' an old soldierly man asked.

'I do not know much about the question, General,' the Princess replied; 'but I would have free-trade as I understand it, and free interchange of thought, a free press, free education, and perfect freedom of action within the bounds of free laws, made by free and benevolent legislators. Then we should have free men and women, a free country, and a free Monarch.'

There was at this moment a lull in the buzz of conversation in the room, probably caused by the entrance of the Princess and her suite; and as the words fell from her lips, clear and distinct, reaching the farthest extent of the assemblage, they produced a profound sensation, and some seconds elapsed before a word was spoken. Then mademoiselle turned to Horritoff and broke the silence, which she had evidently not noticed.

'Is that what you mean when you talk about free-trade, Prince?' she asked. 'If it is, pray count on me as a convert from this very moment.'

The old General, whose remark had called forth this unexpected expression of Madame the Princess's political views, gave her his arm as she ceased speaking, and they began a tour of the rooms, continuing, no doubt, the discussion of a subject just then greatly interesting the world politic.

The pink woman had subsided into a corner, and conversation had been generally resumed; and Horritoff, after a meaning glance to those nearest, consoled himself for the snub he had received by finding mademoiselle at his side.

‘How ready you are!’ he said. ‘The situation was becoming embarrassing. Madame the Princess is dramatic at times, and interesting when she chooses her audience, or subjects suited to those she chooses to address. Just now she was unfortunate in both.’

‘If the subject of freedom does not suit the present company—that is, the majority of them—their looks belie them, Monsieur Horritoff. All the young people, including yourself and myself, would have clapped hands if they had dared. I speak for myself, of course. I have nothing but your words to guide me in including your sentiments. And words, you say, are only useful to conceal thought.’

Everybody near enough to hear Horritoff’s name included with the youthful of the assembly and coupled with free expression, laughed, and the old man tried to join. But do what he would, through any mask he chose to put on, anxiety deep and grave shone forth, and his parchment face to the very lips turned livid, as through the great doors the usher announced:

‘Count and Countess Stetzki, Count Casinir and Countess Wanda, his Highness Prince Loris O——.’

All eyes turned toward the door, and the Princess went forward to meet the party; and as the new-comers advanced into the brilliantly-lighted room, even Horritoff was obliged to join in the scarcely-suppressed murmurs of admiration.

Count Stetzki’s tall though attenuated figure rose

above all others, and the grave, pale woman at his side bore yet the marks on her sweet, gentle face of the terrible anxiety through which she had passed ; but she was still beautiful, and her dress and train of rich gray brocade with its soft trimming of old lace, and her finely-shaped head with its coils of gray hair, made a picture which somewhat prepared one for the loveliness of her daughter.

Wanda was dressed in the toilette of a bride, and surely no lovelier one was ever led to the altar. In feature, form and colouring she was peerless, and yet there was a charm, a beauty beyond all other. The perfect features, the freshness of youth, the beauty of form, all this was there lit by the light of a soul stamped with the mark of God's greatest gift, the infallible evidence of intellect.

The Princess embraced the mother of her future daughter, gave her hand to Count Stetzki, and turned with evident impatience to welcome Wanda. For a moment the radiant beauty of the girl seemed to startle her. Then she opened her arms, and took the lovely child to her heart.

'Loris, my beloved son,' she said, turning and putting Wanda's hand in his, 'with all my heart I congratulate you. Count Casimir,' she continued, 'I welcome you to Petersburg. It was kind of you to yield to our entreaties and to come.'

Then began the request from the other guests for introduction to the newly arrived, and the Chamberlain was soon busy with the arrangements of couples for the supper, and there were the usual absentees whose names had to be replaced ; and in the midst of all the great door

was again opened, and the Emperor came in unannounced.

Behind him in the corridor the light fell on the Royal guard glittering in gold and silver, and the assembly parted and bent low as his Majesty advanced.

The Czar walked straight to the Princess, who at once presented Count and Countess Stetzki, their son, and lastly Wanda.

His Majesty took her hand, bent over her lovely head, and kissed the bride-elect on both cheeks. Then, without awaiting for announcement, his Majesty gave his arm to the Princess, and conducted her to the supper-room. The other guests fell into line and followed.

'Do you sup with us, monsieur?' asked mademoiselle, whilst the ceremony of presentation was being performed.

'No,' Horritoff answered; 'I am here on duty. To watch over you whilst you amuse yourself.'

'Then I wonder what is to become of me?' the young woman asked; 'the Princess said I was of the royal party.'

'Count Casimir Stetzki—Mademoiselle Angela O'Brien,' the Chamberlain said, as if answering her question; and the young people bowed to each other, and followed their elders.

'I hope you speak French, Count?' the young woman said at once.

'I have the happiness to understand your question, mademoiselle, and I hope I may be able to make myself understood in that language.'

'Oh yes; you speak French perfectly. What a blessing it is to society, this language, which forms a kind of

neutral ground upon which we strangers can meet and make known our wants to one another. And now my present want is to know—and I can scarcely exist till you tell me—who that wonderfully beautiful girl is who came in with you, and why she is in bridal attire? and what is she to the Princess, or what is the Princess to her? and what is going to happen here to-night? Tell me all this, and, in exchange, I will tell you who is who, and all and everything about everybody.'

Casimir looked at the girl in amused amazement, and confirmed his first impression that she was very pretty.

'Well, mademoiselle,' he said, 'I will try to answer your questions. Firstly, the young woman of whom you speak so flatteringly is my sister. She is in bridal attire because she is to be married at midnight to—— but you did not ask me that question.'

'Oh! But would you be so cruel as not to tell me?'

'No, I will tell you that, and it will answer another of your questions. My sister is to marry Prince Loris O——; and that is what she is to the Princess, and the Princess to her.'

'But this is astounding! Speak lower; nobody present but your own party knows anything of this. Hush-sh!'

They had reached the table, and were waiting for the signal to sit. There was the usual hush, and then the usual rustle of garments as the guests sat down, and then the low murmur of conversation.

The Emperor sat at a cross-table between the Princess and the Countess Stetzka. Count Stetzki was on the other side of the Princess; and Colonel von Busch supported Madame Stetzka. At one end of the small table Loris and Wanda; at the other, Casimir and mademoiselle. At

the long table below, twenty other guests sat down. These were chiefly officers of the household and their wives.

The Emperor looked tired and careworn; but his Majesty was most attentive to the Princess, and also to the guests.

General conversation was the order for the evening—a wise arrangement upon such an occasion, when the usual etiquette would have imposed a trying silence; and of this privilege none seemed so appreciative as the two couples at either end of the table.

Loris was as radiantly happy as his bride; and Casimir, unused to the charm of a witty and beautiful woman's society, sailed away on a summer sea, in blissful blindness to rocks and quicksands ahead.

Suddenly he was awakened to the mutability of earthly bliss by the question :

‘Where do you go from Petersburg?’

Go! was he ever going away from this too delightful situation? Ah! yes, the question must be answered. The beautiful dark blue eyes were turned upon him inquiringly.

‘From Petersburg,’ he said dreamily. ‘It does not matter where I go; my people go to Paris.’

‘And you?’

‘I return to Poland; at least, I wish to do so. My mother wishes me to go to Nice with the party; I much prefer going home.’

‘I am so glad your sister is going to Nice; I shall see her there. We——’

‘You going to Nice!’ Casimir cried, startling the young girl at his side, who hastily glanced at the Princess, and

saw that she as well as the Emperor had been amused spectators of the scene ; but the entirely absorbed young man saw nothing of this. He turned in his chair till his back was all that was visible to the royal party, and with undisguised delight declared that of course he would go to Nice with his family ; nothing now should prevent him.

‘The young lady to whom your son is speaking is the daughter of an early friend of mine,’ said Princess O—. ‘She came to me last year on a visit, and I have persuaded her to join my little family. She is almost alone in the world, and I am very fond of her.’

‘She is English?’ Count Stetzki asked.

‘Yes ; or the same thing—Irish.’

‘And noble?’

‘Oh dear yes ! Her father was a younger son of Lord somebodies, and they are directly descended from Irish kings.’

‘Oh indeed !’ the anxious father said ; and in his heart he wondered if this great connection were beyond the reach of his dear son, whose impulsive heart he thought and knew was in great danger.

‘Yes,’ mademoiselle was saying ; ‘we remain in Nice a fortnight, then to Paris till the middle of May. After that, I suppose I shall go home.’

‘To England?’

‘No ; to Ireland.’

‘But that is the same.’

‘Are Russia, and Poland the same?’

The young man grew pale and serious in an instant, and glanced up hastily at the Emperor, who was talking freely and affably with Countess Stetzka.

‘No,’ he said, ‘nor ever will be. But England is different, and has good laws.’

‘For herself,’ the girl answered. ‘They have failed in my country. From being straitened in means we became poor; from poverty we went on to distress; now we have arrived at destitution: still and long we kept up our character for honesty and virtue. Now we have crime never known before in our unhappy country. Is this the result of a benevolent Government? England has tried many remedies, and proposed many more—sometimes homœopathic doses, which have done little harm, except to irritate the patient because they were administered by force. Then another opinion is taken, and some big and loathsome drug is crammed down the poor people’s throats against their will, and, because England took the same dose voluntarily, it is declared far and near that we have just what is good for us.* But do forgive me. I forget myself when on that subject.’

‘You know so much and talk so beautifully,’ Casimir said, sinking deeper and deeper.

‘Surely,’ mademoiselle said, ‘we are not going to stay here all night. See! the clock points to eleven. Pray when is the ceremony to begin?’

‘I wish we were to sit here all night,’ Casimir answered; ‘but we are going now, I fear.’

As he spoke a signal was given. The Emperor was on his feet, and now his Majesty was leaving the table, and beside him walked Countess Stetzka, whilst the Princess, leaning on the arm of the Count, followed.

Then Wanda took her brother’s arm, as had been arranged. Prince Loris conducted mademoiselle. The other members of the party followed, and all took their way to the chapel.

There they found many others, chiefly ministers and high officials, amongst them Horritoff, Count and Countess Kolmere; and, in a corner where they could see all that took place without themselves being seen, Marta and Zeka.

The Emperor walked straight to the chancel, followed by Count Stetzki and the Princess, and, as the clock struck twelve, a curious thing took place.

In this small chapel, before the altar, where officiated a single priest, unattended by pomp, surrounded by few friends, the Emperor and Autocrat of all the Russias, Czar of Poland, Grand Duke of Finland, was married at midnight to the Princess O——, the friend and confidante of his life, thereby doing an act of justice, making the only return he could for a life of perfect devotion, which had cost her the dearest treasure of a good woman—her good name.

The ceremony over, Loris and Wanda followed, and two loving hearts were bound together till death should sever them.

No words can describe the amazement of those present who, not previously informed, witnessed the marriage of the Czar. There had been rumours, and many had been the versions given (proceeding from the very best authority) of some important change in the Monarch's life; but if any guessed the truth, no one dared to give it publicity, and the general impression was that his Majesty was about to marry a foreign Princess of royal blood, and that the Princess O—— was to take up her abode in France. All these tongues were to be silenced now. What had been done? How had they behaved towards this woman in the time that was past for ever? It be-

hoved them to remember now that she was given the power of an Empress, now that her husband was their Monarch.

Returning to the *salon*, the congratulations began, and many eyes were turned towards Prince Horritoff; for it was no secret in Court circles that the Princess O—— hated him with an intensity only equalled by his dislike and jealousy of her.

He stood near the door of the chapel as the wedding-parties came out; he bowed low, followed them, and took a position like a sentry at the entrance to the *salon*.

One after another the guests took leave for the night, and only the family party, with Countess Kolmere, her husband, mademoiselle, and one or two others remained. The Princess was talking earnestly with Count Stetzki. The Emperor sat beside the beautiful Wanda, mademoiselle near his Majesty, giving a lively account of herself. Horritoff, only just visible from the part of the room in which the family had gathered, was standing in an attitude of dejection, when suddenly there was a sound—terribly familiar in the capital of late—a sound which paled every cheek, and grouped the little party around his Majesty's chair; which shook the chandeliers, and rocked the floors beneath their feet, and seemed to shake the city to its foundations.

Then followed a scene of wild confusion. The guests, so lately departed, left their chambers, and rushed to the entrance hall. Half dressed, as many of them were, the guard had difficulty in preventing them rushing out into the streets; the women screaming, the men frantically ejaculating. Then, finding egress here impossible, a rush was made for the *salon* they had just left; but the

door was closed and guarded, and at last they were persuaded to return to their apartments.

In the *salon*, though there was less excitement, there was no less terror, and the moments seemed hours which intervened between the shock and the entrance of an aide-de-camp with particulars of the catastrophe.

‘An explosion, sire,’ the young man said; ‘a mine.’

‘Where?’ the Czar asked.

‘Under the Winter Palace, Majesty.’

‘Good God! under our very feet. Who has suffered?’

‘Many, it is feared, sire. It is a terrible scene. Nothing was to be learnt but the catastrophe itself.’

‘I must go instantly,’ his Majesty said. ‘Call up the guard.’

Go! go! out into the streets among the assassins! Expose his life; face the wildly excited people! Surely he would not do anything so disastrous to the safety of himself and the capital! All gathered around him, all begged and besought, none prevailed. Go he would.

Other messengers began to arrive, further particulars to come in—those particulars which, flashed by electricity from one end of the world to the other, opened the eyes of nations to a curious state of things in our Russia.

Here was a long-premeditated crime, carefully and successfully worked out in the very face of the greatest and most efficient police force in the world—a crime planned against the life of the Emperor and the members of his household, and carried into effect underneath the very throne of Russia. How wonderful! How strong and pervading must this organization be! How perfect in all its machinery to circumvent the great Horritoff,

and defeat his myriads ! Where was the centre from which this secret power worked ? Whose the brain that directed it ?

The streets leading to the Winter Palace were filled with an excited multitude. Mounted soldiers dashed through, others hurried along on foot, terribly exaggerated stories were handed from one to the other. The police rushed wildly from point to point, accusing, arresting, releasing, taking most minute particulars of the scene of the disaster ; in fact, making themselves as abominably useless as possible. In the midst of all this a great shout rent the still, cold air, and the Emperor appeared upon the scene, whilst cheer after cheer rang up in joy and thanksgiving for the escape of the man, beloved of his people—the man whom his servants would have us believe that those same people sought to destroy.

By the Emperor's carriage ride three young men, toward each and every one of whom suspicion of disloyalty has been directed by those whose duty it is to watch over the safety of the King ; to guard him from danger like this, from which he had just escaped, and to find out and place near the royal person those who are devoted to his welfare, and who can be implicitly trusted. Instead of this, what are the facts ? Innocent men have been accused, and their ruin sought, whilst the guilty who have been goaded to terrible deeds, have reached through unguarded paths the object of their vengeance. The three young men who rode by the side of their master, standing between him and danger which might threaten, were Loris, Prince O——, Count Kolmere, and Casimir, and the young Count Stetzki ; and no three

hearts beat with more undivided loyalty, and no three men were more ready and willing to lay down their lives for the safety of their King.

It was difficult to restrain the Czar from descending to the very scene of the disaster. His subjects had received the blow meant for him; his place was, he said, by their side. But there were fears of unexploded bombs, and if he sought this danger he must expose the lives of his faithful followers, for of course they would not leave him. So he was persuaded to return to the Princess, whom he had left in a state of the greatest anxiety for his safety, and he had reached the gates of the palace before he missed Count Kolmere.

His Majesty turned to inquire for the young man, when a great shout from the multitude, preceded by a slight report, reached them.

‘What is this?’ the Czar asked. ‘Have they not finished their hellish work yet?’

All paused. There was great commotion in the distance. The sounds were coming nearer.

His Majesty was implored to return to the palace. No one knew what had happened.

‘The gates were hastily closed after his Majesty and the guards and attendants had passed through, and it was some time before they were re-opened to admit a courier with intelligence.’

The commotion was caused by the miners at the palace having come upon two unexploded bombs amongst the *débris* which they were clearing away, in order to extricate a victim of the disaster whom they believed to be still alive. The Emperor had expressed the deepest anxiety about the work of clearing away, and searching

for possible survivors of the terrible explosion, and, as has been seen, his Majesty had with great difficulty been persuaded from descending, and himself superintending the work, and had only yielded to the entreaties of his friends upon being assured that there was no longer danger. But then, as Count Kolmere made his way through the crowd, following the royal guard, he heard of this new and terrible cause of alarm, and as he lingered, and was instantly separated from his party, he saw the miners rush up and out of the way of danger. At the same moment he heard that three poor wounded creatures had been abandoned below. In an instant he had dismounted; the crowd, now rapidly scattering, fell back at his command; he entered the terrible excavation, seized an abandoned torch, and disappeared, only to reappear ten minutes later, bearing in his hands the deadly instrument of death.

‘Back, back!’ he cried to the scattered and panic-stricken crowd, which melted away before this terrible enemy.

The young man struggled over the rough earth and fallen stone and brick, and reached the open square which formed an outer court of the palace, threw down the bomb, and, the next instant, lay bruised and bleeding from the explosion.

Then the multitude began to realize the situation, and rent the heavens with shouts of admiration of the heroic act; and this it was that had reached the Czar and his escort before the palace gates.

Tears were in the old man’s eyes, and his voice, which never trembled at personal danger, was unsteady when he gave the order for the brave sufferer to be brought

instantly to the palace, and that Madame Kolmere was to know nothing of the accident at present; and when, an hour later, his Majesty stood over the young man, wounded and terribly bruised, and learnt from the surgeons that there was little hope of his recovery, he fairly broke down, and for hours forgot all else but the brave sufferer.

Presently the official report of the catastrophe was brought in by Horritoff, whom the Emperor received in person.

A ghastly story. Destruction, murder, arrest, confession of the crime, defiance of authority, indifference to punishment, desperation of the criminals captured, escape of some of whom, and of whose whereabouts the police 'had a clue.' Then the usual dark hints of suspicion in hitherto unsuspected quarters, of complicity of some in high places.

But here the Czar brought the interview to an end.

'We shall have no suspicions or suspectings. The trials shall be publicly conducted; the guilty only shall suffer the penalty of their crime. Let the sufferers have every care and attendance. My brave young friend Kolmere is, I fear, past help; and the bitterest pang of this dark affair is that I suffer at the thought that for one single hour such a man should have been under suspicion of disloyalty.'

The Czar turned away and sought the Princess O——, whom he found with Madame Kolmere, and Countess Stetzka.

Wanda had returned to her apartment, accompanied by mademoiselle, where the two girls remained in tearful suspense till the return of Loris and Casimir with news of

the dreadful event, and also of the Emperor's orders that the Princess O——, her son, and the whole party should leave Petersburg for Nice the following day.

In the boudoir of the Princess O—— sat Madame Kolmere, unsuspecting the terrible condition of her husband; she was trying to quiet the fears of the Princess, when his Majesty himself arrived upon the scene.

With his usual directness he broke the dreadful tidings at once. Taking the young woman's hand, he said :

‘ My child, I have bad news for you. Kolmere has been hurt. He is here in the palace; you shall see him immediately. Princess O—— will go with you. There, my child ! bear this blow with all the strength you can call up. Upon our care and our courage may depend his life.’

‘ Then my husband is not dead ?’

The poor young woman had dropped into a chair, her face pale as marble, her eyes staring wildly up into his Majesty's face.

‘ Oh, no, *ma-chère*. My poor child, God is merciful. Let us hope.’

Here a messenger entered with a word from the surgeon attending Count Kolmere. The patient had undergone the necessary investigation better than could have been hoped for. The wounds were not mortal. There was a fear of concussion. The surgeon would remain by his bedside. Should he awake conscious from his present state the very greatest quiet was imperative.

Princess O—— accompanied the poor stricken lady to her own chamber, where she found it impossible to leave her alone; and fortunately she bethought her of Madame Stetzka. Surely it was the vocation of this noble lady to

comfort and console. The Princess recognised this instantly that she saw the sorrow-stricken woman taken to the heart of the good Countess, and she returned to his Majesty greatly relieved. Here she found Count Stetzki, who added his entreaties to those of the Princess that for a time his Majesty should leave Petersburg ; but nothing would move him to take this step.

As each messenger came in with the latest reports the Czar grew more and more excited, and it was with the greatest difficulty the Princess could prevail upon him not to rush out and personally superintend his orders.

‘What do these madmen hope to gain by my death?’ he exclaimed. ‘Do they not know that the King never dies, and that my son, actuated by his love and veneration, which none can doubt, and influenced by filial devotion, would carry out to the letter my policy and my simplest wish? Do they mean to carry out this work on my son and his heirs? Impossible! It is a fever which has broken out amongst the people. They are delirious—deprived for the time of their reason. It will pass, and we shall have peace again.’

‘It is a fever, sire; and there is a remedy, and only one remedy,’ Count Stetzki said.

‘I know what you would say, Count. Blood-letting only cools the patient; it does not stamp out the epidemic and strengthen the constitution.’

‘I was not thinking of that, Majesty. It could do nothing but harm. Each of those would-be assassins become martyrs the moment they receive the just punishment their act deserves. They each and all rise to a position of importance, of admiration, yes, and of envy to those who believe your Majesty to be the fountain-

head from which flows the oppression of your Majesty's subjects.'

'Well, Count, what is to open their eyes to the absurdity of this charge?'

Count Stetzki stood up, his pale face slightly flushed with excitement.

'Sire,' he said, 'before the Monarch of Russia can sit with safety on his throne, Russia must pass through a revolution!'

'Revolution, Count,' his Majesty repeated, 'which it is the duty of the Monarch to subdue.'

'No, sire, which it is the duty and will be the necessity of the monarch to lead!'

The Czar started, and Princess O—— tightened her grasp on his hand.

'Sire,' Count Stetzki continued, 'to the masses you in your person embody the authority and the power of the state, and upon you falls the responsibility of laws most oppressive, of crimes and cruelties you never dreamed of inflicting, and from which your great heart would turn with horror, even were such tortures suggested for the punishment of your enemies. For the oppression of the weak and the lowly, the suspicion and punishment of the innocent, for the want of education and darkness of the Russian mind, for the seal which is placed on the lips of freedom, the chains which bind liberty, for this and every misfortune resulting from bad government your most gracious Majesty is held responsible by the masses. Is it wonderful then that these poor human beings, with bodies to suffer and souls embittered, with no hope of a better life than the one of daily, hourly torture—is it wonderful that, believing as they do that this misery

which thousands of their fellow-countrymen have suffered before, and which they leave to thousands to come after them, may be stopped with a single life—is it wonderful that they determine to put an end to that life and to rid the world of such calamity? And, sire, does there exist a Russian worthy of the name who would not do the same were the charges true? Ah, sire, long, long ago, when these limbs were full of youth and strength, and the world was young to me, I started out on a mission to my poor countrymen, my work being to teach the people within my reach the true situation, and to direct them where to look for the real authors of their woes. Sire, I knew your Majesty's benevolent intentions and your love for the people. With my best influence, and by night and by day, I laboured, and with great success, to show the people how to prepare for what I knew would follow the abolition of serfdom, towards that which I could see your Majesty's thoughts tending—constitutional rights. Sire, the result of that youthful mission of mine was exile; and these withered limbs, and this broken and weakened body is my reward. But, sire, the spirit burns still beneath this feeble breast, and every spark of life that remains is at your Majesty's disposal; and, in saying this for myself, I am speaking for thousands, nay, millions, of your Majesty's devoted subjects.'

The Emperor took the thin hand of the old man in his own.

'I believe it,' he said. 'I believe that when the time shall come for a change, the Monarch will have the support of the masses. But the other classes?'

'Sire, the time has come, and you have the undivided support of the masses and of the aristocracy. Between

these two social elements there is a third. That will oppose ; but it must capitulate, or it must die. Crushed out by the pressure of healthy influences the disease will disappear, and the people will share the responsibility of government with their King. Sire, pardon me ; I speak the feelings, the wishes of your people. I never dared to hope for such an opportunity as this ; pardon my boldness, and believe me most humbly and obediently ready to serve your Majesty with the remnant of my poor life. One thing I must implore your Highness, not to expose unnecessarily the life most precious to this unhappy country. These people are maddened and entirely desperate ; and your Majesty sees how impotent are the so-called guardians of your most precious life when, under the very eyes of these officials, your Majesty's palace is invaded.'

'And this outrage has been perpetrated at a moment when the official world believed your Majesty to be at the palace,' said Princess O——. 'Oh, sire, leave this unholy alliance which encircles us around ! Let it perish ! Take time to consider Count Stetzki's words, and call upon your loyal subjects to disband these assassins. They will cease to exist, these would-be regicides, when those who create them are powerless to work harm.'

'My child,' his Majesty said, 'the question is a difficult one. I know more of the workings of the silent machinery than either you or Count Stetzki dream of ; but the evil is so embedded in our social lives that to tear it out will damage the entire system, and I fear there is nothing but time to look to as a safe cure of the disease. However, I thank you, Count, for your frankly spoken words of loyal support, and be assured that not one word

you have said shall be forgotten. Good-night. I am glad you are going to France ; you need change and rest.'

Count Stetzki, who had been greatly excited during the long speech, and whose wan face was paler than ever, knelt, kissed the hand of the Sovereign, and, bowing low to the Princess, withdrew.

The Czar, deaf to all entreaties, determined to return to the Winter Palace, and half an hour later left the Princess in tears, and drove again through the excited city and a greatly demoralized people.

The following morning, the city being more quiet, his Majesty visited the wounded, and saw the prisoners, a few penniless Zouehs, chiefly students. How had they succeeded with their desperate enterprise in the face of a power of a great force of perfectly trained and organized police ?

This question was the first to occur to the mind, and various were the stories invented to answer it. It was the Pope who furnished the means and the secret machinery ; then it was England, jealous of Russia's prosperity ; then it was the Jews. Everyone had a different story ; for all were convinced that some secret agency, rich and powerful, existed, and that these poor creatures about to suffer death for the crime were tools only, and entirely ignorant of the hand that really used them.

The second day after the explosion was a sad one to Princess O——, who, refusing to leave his Majesty, bade farewell to her son and daughter and their other parents, and returned, sad and with dark forebodings, to her beautiful but darkened home. Count Kolmere still lingered between life and death, and Princess O—— and made-

moiselle were constant in their womanly help and loving sympathy.

Days passed wearily away. All the ghastly work of trying, convicting and punishing the perpetrators of the late outrage was going on; and nothing broke the monotony of her life save the frequent and affectionate letters the Princess received daily from her children, conveying to her their heartfelt sympathy and their perfect happiness.

A month had passed, and there was little change in their invalid, when one morning the Czar went into the darkened chamber and sat down beside the bed of the wounded soldier. Madame Kolmere went to the window and threw a little light on her husband's wan face, and for the first time since that dreadful night she saw recognition in his eyes. In a moment she was beside him. He took her hand in his feeble grasp.

'I remember all, Maria. It has come to me all to-day. How long?'

'Four long weeks, my love—four weeks of darkness; and now, thank God!'

'And his Majesty?'

'Is safe, my son;' said the Czar. 'And now, not one other word. I will send for the doctor. I feel you are past danger.'

'Thanks be to God!'

The young man's eyes were riveted on the Emperor's face. He put forth his feeble hand and touched the sleeve of his Majesty's coat, then smiled satisfactorily.

'My father served his country and his King, sire. I am no less loyal than he.'

How the words came back to the Monarch as he stood

over the young man, of whom there seemed but a shadow of his former self !

All that day the little party hung in breathless suspense on the doctor's words ; and the next morning's dawn brought them glad tidings. The life would be spared.

CHAPTER VII.

‘GO NOT FORTH TO-DAY.

‘For thou hast made the happy earth thy hell,
Filled it with cursing cries and deep exclaims.
If thou delight to view thy heinous deeds,
Behold this pattern of thy butcheries!’

King Richard III.

AGAIN we are at the Winter Palace, and in the breakfast-room of the Monarch.

There are several guests, and the conversation naturally turned upon the subject of the explosion. There is a Grand Duke and Grand Duchess present, and they have expressed, what all Petersburg feels, surprise at the impotency of the much-vaunted police force of the metropolis.

The Emperor has been very serious and sad since the late terrible attempt on his life. He has, much to the surprise of some of his ministers, to the great delight of many, and to the confusion of others, taken upon himself the investigation of the grievances of his subjects; and he has insisted upon knowing something of the lives and histories of those charged and convicted of the diabolical affair at the Mutz Palace, in order to get at the root of dissatisfaction, and to learn, if possible, what desperate grievance drove these people to such desperate ends..

What he learnt from day to day made him a sadder if a wiser man. And now his whole mind, his every thought, was devoted to plans for the revolution of the Bureau system of his kingdom; to bring the people within the influence of the throne; to make his subjects understand the Government of Russia in its benevolent aspect and intentions, which were frustrated by enemies to justice, by selfish vermin who, for their own ends, undermine and infest every department. To do this without giving his people a change of Government, for which they were neither prepared nor educated, and which, if supported by constitutional representation, would only, under these circumstances, lead to a worse system of bribery, corruption, and greater confusion. Nothing short of the support of the masses would give sufficient strength to the arm of the Monarch, if he raised it against his common enemy; and to do this within the years of life left him was his constant, his most earnest consideration, and occupied his every waking thought.

On one step his Majesty had determined, and that perhaps, under all the circumstances, the one best calculated to pave the way to greater changes. The Emperor had fully decided upon giving the most perfect freedom to the press, a freedom which should be checked by nothing short of treasonable publication. And this very measure formed the chief topic of conversation at the breakfast-table upon the morning when this chapter is introduced.

‘Here, sire,’ said the Grand Duke, who was opposed to the measure, laying down an English paper—‘here is a specimen of the liberties taken or conceded, certainly permitted, the editors or owners of papers in England.

Here is an article of positive abuse of the Prime Minister and of the entire Cabinet which forms the governing body of a country at this moment. I cannot see the good to come from such liberties, which must weaken the respect of the masses for their rulers, and create confusion and suspicion. I think them most mischievous.'

'And yet, you see,' the Emperor replied, 'no harm comes from them. The people, accustomed to the free discussion of political matters, and of every other subject which is of public interest, criticize, and accept or reject such articles as that according to their value, and that is often the value of so many words. Besides, this paper is a party organ. It abuses these men because they belong to the other side. There is no personal feeling in the matter. Probably the editor has dined or supped with these gentlemen on the most friendly terms the day before. If one of them were to die, he would write an obituary, and detail the minister's many virtues, and probably put his paper into mourning. Besides, I am in favour of liberty, not dangerous license, of the press. But apropos of English newspapers, here is a paragraph which amuses me. The English press always throws over us Russians a veil of romance I fear we do not deserve. They delight in clothing our simplest movements with dark hints of mysterious designs. At the theatre in England it is the same. Our secret police are there represented as so secret that they penetrate into the very bosoms of our families and spirit away whomsoever they want. Our diplomatists are given characters for universal knowledge of the world political, and endowed with astuteness and perception of character my good friend here, Prince B——, will I am sure repudiate;

and then our diplomatic representatives are furnished with a staff of experts against which no Government can guard its secrets.'

'A libel which your Majesty can repudiate,' said Prince B—— testily, who had been chafing under the Emperor's allusion to what the world thought a blunder on the part of this noble whilst ambassador at a foreign Court.

'Well, well, B——, you have your revenge,' his Majesty said, laughing. 'But to return to the British idea of Russian life political, that character with which we are always identified—which is as inseparable from an English picture of Russian life as the fur-coat, which figures even in summer scenes—the Russian spy, that amuses me most. I think Sardou invented him or her (for according to report we keep a supply of both on hand), and the English stole the patent, and have manufactured adulterated specimens innumerable, and the demand seems to warrant the supply.'

'A most mischievous invention,' the Grand Duke said, furnishing a character most serviceable to any adventurer who can speak a little Russian. 'I once met a woman who was pointed out to me as a secret agent of your Majesty. I was much amused at the way the woman played her rôle. By some means I was unable to discover how this person had made her way into the society of the aristocracy, and I met her at the house of a minister. She was neither young nor beautiful, nor distinguished by cultivation or accomplishments. She was unrecognised by your Majesty's ambassador and his family. Then why was she there? No one could tell me. Yet there she

stood amongst dukes and duchesses and the great of the land, playing her part with such transparency that I assure you I was convulsed with laughter. Her face impassible and expressionless, silent as the Sphinx; the drooping eyelid, the sidelong glance, the quick movement of the hands as if accustomed to secret papers and despatches. I assure you Sara Bernhardt could not do the part better. And it answered, as her presence in that assemblage testified.

But why admit a spy? Surely no honourable man or woman could be found to respect that character.'

'Ah, Majesty, that is a question addressed to human weakness; the whole human family must defend and answer it. We all prefer fiction to fact, the mysterious to the commonplace and real; and in searching for the unusual and original, we often find and encourage the notorious and the dangerous. Besides, your Majesty must not forget these creatures we are discussing are accepted as the unacknowledged representatives of yourself and of your Government.'

'But who pays them?'

'The public. Once they have found an important footing in a country, their wares sufficiently advertised, they have a market.'

'But what do they do?'

'Some paint bad pictures; some write nonsense which becomes more or less important by appearing in a respectable journal, or through the efforts of a publisher; and I am told that others, especially female Russian spies, drive a good business and earn a good income by acting for some great milliner in Paris. I must say, sire, these people are patriots all. They have

left home, friends, and fortune in order to introduce Russian institutions to the world, and bind other countries in friendly alliance with ours; and they are most loyal to your Majesty, and loud in defence of your Government.'

'Do these people ever reach the Court?' asked the Emperor.

'In countries which have a Court, sire, I believe they are seldom to be met. They prevail in England, France, and I think they have been found in America.'

'But in England,' said a young prince, 'is there not a Court?'

'No, my son,' the Grand Duke answered. 'England is a kingdom without a Court.'

'And the country seems to flourish under the bereavement,' the Emperor said.

'But,' asked the Grand Duchess, 'really and truly does the Queen of England never receive her people, the aristocracy of the country?'

'Never,' answered the Duke. 'Her Majesty never receives. She tolerates a kind of invasion of the bourgeoisie once or twice a year, when the doors of the great barn, Buckingham Palace, are opened in the morning to a crowd of pushing, struggling females, who, with bare shoulders and arms, and long tails, are marched past the Queen and a few of her Majesty's friends and children, greatly to the diversion of the latter. These people are not entertained by her Majesty to the extent of a cup of tea, yet nobody cares. The march past over, the British matron returns to her luxurious home, to her newspaper, which ridicules the whole performance, from the royal personages down. The royal portals have been

passed for the first and the last time. A royal toll has been paid uncomplainingly in the shape of a great bill for Court dresses, and unless a cold has been caught whilst standing for hours, half naked, in the halls and corridors of the palace, neither good nor harm has been done. Verily, the Queen of England has shown the world that a kingdom may exist happily without a Court.'

'But to return to the spies—these Russian spies. Do they fall into line and march past the Queen and the select audience?'

'Oh—never! Not being English, they would have to reach the royal presence through the ambassador. That being impossible, as they have no claim, either social or official, they are forced to relinquish the honour; but they mention the circumstance with a degree of mystery most amusing. "Of course I am not able to go to Court publicly," a young Russian adventuress said to an English friend of mine; "but I am there all the same." And there was not a doubt in the mind of the old gentleman as to the veracity of the assertion when he repeated it to me. This same woman spoke familiarly of the members of our family, of our best names as of friends, and had especially honoured me by asserting a warm friendship and intimacy.'

'A kindness more honoured in the breach than in the observance, I must say,' said one, as all rose from the table at the signal of his Majesty.

The Czar went immediately to the apartments of the Princess, and found her in most depressed spirits.

'Something weighed heavy on my eyelids this morning, sire, and I have a most unaccountable foreboding of evil. I am going to ask a favour.'

‘It is granted before the asking, sweet Princess.’

‘Then, like that other Cæsar’s wife, I beg thee “go not forth to-day.” Give me this day. I am so much alone I begin to know what it is to have nerves. Stay with me to-day, then—I beg, I implore thee!’

‘Sweet lady, that is no request of thine, but of some good angel pleading in my behalf, to give me, the King, pleasure. You know, *chère amie*, I have no pleasure where you are not; but I must do my duty, and that calls me away from you for one short hour; and then, my sweet friend, I am your slave.’

‘But,’ pleaded the Princess, ‘I want that one particular hour. Let duty wait on pleasure, just this once.’

‘Ah, and who was it that this very morning read me a sweet homily on the duty of Princes? I have laid every word to heart. And now duty——’

‘Dear friend, my husband and my King, this is no caprice of mine. I have ever been subject to presentiments of coming danger. I knew that misfortune had befallen me before I heard of my dear father’s death. I felt the blow that struck down my husband. I feel to-day that some danger threatens. My son is safe. Then, upon you, sire, my thoughts and fears turn. I beg—I implore you—do not go out to-day!’

‘My child, is this palace safer than elsewhere? No, my love; we have seen the reverse. Michael goes with me, and I promise you I will go carefully guarded; though I believe, in my soul, that to be unnecessary. Were I to listen only to the dictates of my own heart I would go amongst my people as freely, and I believe as safely, as I do amongst the members of my own household. What have I to fear? What act of mine, I might say what

thought, has not been for the welfare of my people? Then whom is there to fear? A few madmen seized with a widespread and still spreading epidemic. These assassins are not peculiar to my kingdom. No country is free from them. How long is it since the head of a republic fell by the hand of one of these? He, a man selected by the people, whose power was limited to the execution of the laws made by the people—he fell a victim to the delirium of this disease. All this excitement will pass away, and, for a time, we shall have peace. But I have no right to cause you and my dear children anxiety, so I will go abroad carefully guarded.'

'All that you say, sire, is perfectly true, and no doubt revolt against authority is a contagious disease. But here, in your Majesty's dominions, there is cause, grave cause, for a rebellion against a tyranny your Majesty's poor subjects are taught to believe you, sire, responsible for.'

'We need not discuss this now, sweet Princess. You know my intention already expressed to my ministers and counsellors. I am determined that the grievances of the humblest shall reach representatives selected and appointed by the people themselves. And now, dearest, I must go. I shall return about four o'clock.'

He was gone.

The Princess sat down, and tried to overcome her sad forebodings, which had weighed upon her spirits all the day.

His Majesty's declaration to personally investigate the causes of the present terrible conspiracy, and the order which was about to go forth for the protection of the weak and suffering, was, the Princess felt sure, a sentence of danger, if not death, pronounced by himself.

He would never be allowed to carry out plans which would expose the whole system of tyranny and extortion to which his subjects were exposed. There would be a terrible struggle, and who should win?

The Princess found it difficult to follow her usual occupations. She tried one thing after another, and finally called her secretary and began to dictate letters. It was impossible; she could not tear her thoughts from her miserable forebodings. She dismissed the secretary, seized the pen herself, and began a task which was now the great pleasure of her life—writing to her children.

Fairly started upon this pleasant task, she wrote on and on, page after page, written and numbered like a volume. Everything of the slightest interest, social or political, was duly chronicled, with every detail, knowing the interest her dear ones would take in the slightest item of news conveyed by her.

Coffee came in, but remained untouched; attendants passed in and out on their various duties, still she wrote on. At last the letter was ended. The budget finished, enveloped and sealed, and she rose up to receive a bouquet of loveliest flowers sent by his Majesty.

Lilies and roses and forget-me-nots—a mass of beautiful tints breathing perfume. She bent her head over them, and smiled with pleasure as she saw that her own flower had not been forgotten. There, in company with the great and gorgeous, nestled her own sweet eglantine. How kind! how loving! how thoughtful was the heart which planned, the hand that gave such pleasure!

As she stood there, the lovely flowers in her hand, her head bent over them, a giant hand seemed to shake the earth under her feet. Then a terrible sound vibrated

through hall and corridor ; and, as the flowers dropped from her grasp, a second crash, and a report louder than the first seemed to paralyze her heart ; she staggered, and fell into the arms of Marta.

March 13th, 1881.

A shock which shook the earth, the sound of which penetrated the palaces of the great, and reached the habitations of the obscure and remote ; a shock which shattered a great institution and wrecked the hopes of millions—this terrible thunderbolt fell upon St. Petersburg to-day, killed an old man, and left a heart desolate.

THE END.

[May, 1892.]



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